屍鬼
SHIKI
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小野不由美
新潮文庫

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sinnesspiel

1

It was on September 20th that Sotoba resident Katou Yoshihide came to the hospital, supported by his wife Sumie. An emergency case, Towada called. Toshio who was in the middle of examinations turned his eyes towards Yasuyo. Knowing his intent, Yasuyo stepped out into the waiting room where the old man, supported by his wife at one side and Mutou at the other, had at last been settled into a chair.

"Are you all right?" Yasuyo lowered herself to look into the old man's face. He looked faintly at Yasuyo and gave a nod, but it was a vague one, his color poor, shoulders heaving as he breathed. His breath was shallow and weak. When she tookh is hand, she could tell he was in a cold sweat. His pulse was also fast.

Ritsuko and Satoko turned around as Yasuyo came hurrying. "A stretcher. I'll let the doctor know, so carry him to the treatment room. Be sure to take his pulse and blood pressure. It might be best to prepare an artery catheter."

Yes, they responded, briskly heading off as Yasuyo returned to the examination room. Toshio asked how it was, looking up to her.

"He has been carried to the treatment room," she said, looking Toshio in the eye. It seemed that conveyed her meaning. Toshio excused himself from the patient and went towards the treatment room.

"What's his condition?"

"Tachycardia and tachypnea. There are some signs of cyanosis and his pupils are constricted."

Toshio nodded and entered the treatment room. "What's happened?"

When Toshio asked, Sumie wrung her sinewy hands together. "Two, maybe three days ago, he had caught a cold and was bedridden. He said himself that if he slept he would get better but today he's still like this---Junior Doctor, it

couldn't be pneumonia, could it?"

"I can't say anything yet."

Satoko presented him with a memo. There were many strokes of his pulse, his blood pressure extremely low.

"Artery catheter."

Yes, Ritsuko said presenting the catheter. Katou's wrist was already in place. Toshio nodded while speaking to Sumie.

"What's been his temperature?"

"Around 38 degrees."

"Cough of headache?"

"There has been no cough. And he didn't especially mention a... We really thought it was a cold. He had said so himself. That's why I had him take a decoction. My mother-in-law used to use that medicine whenever she had a cold, and no matter how bad it was it would be cured. And yet, he didn't even get a little better at all and..."

"Gas analysis," said Toshio, handing off the centrifuge tube and turning back to Sumio. "....What are you even thinking?"

Sumie looked at him blankly, eyes opened.

"Cyanosis is occurring. Why didn't you call an ambulance while you were bringing him over here? And on top of that you're telling me you thought it was probably a cold? When'd you become a doctor? Why the hell is an amateur just giving her own diagnosis and administering her own medicines!"

Doctor, Ritsuko said in a small voice. Toshio promptly glowered at Ritsuko, then immediately realized he'd lost himself.

"....No, I am so sorry."

Sumio was visibly dismayed.

"I'm sorry. Anyway, we will call an ambulance. Until then we will perform what minimal treatment we can, therefore."

"Uhm, is the old man that unwell?"

"I can't say without test results but it is certain he is having respiratory failure."

Probably ARDS, Toshio added in his thoughts. It was that. And the patient was in the latter half of it---it was already switching phases to MOF. Having Ritsuko prepare compressed oxygen, he gave instructions for a chest XP. For the time being he gave Sumie the standard questions.

Before he could get all of the results the ambulance arrived, and Yoshihide was taken to the national hospital.

"Sensei," Yasuyo began in a low voice watching the ambulance drive off. "It may be that, mightn't it?"

"....Probably, yeah."

sinnesspiel

2

Before Higan, on the night of the 20th, Seishin paid a visit to Murasako Munehide in Sotoba. Murasako Munehide was the manager for the Sotoba community mourning crew. He therefore would have been the representative manager for the two consecutive funerals in Sotoba.

The lights were out in the enclosure of the shopping district that was the Murasako rice shop, the shutters already drawn down but, perhaps because he had called in advance, one of them was left half open. Bending down to open the glass door to enter the shop, Seishin called from the entryway.

There was an immediate answer, the one to pop his face out being the eldest son Munetaka. Munetaka showed a frank and honest smile.

"Yo. It's been a while, huh? What's up?"

It is the usual, Seishin answered as Munetaka ushered him inside.

"Business with my old man, then? He's waiting inside. Go on up."

Motioned to do so Seishin went from the store up towards the living area. Munetaka was three grades above Seishin. They had never been in the same school but the second son of the family Hideki was one year above him. In high school he also came over to the Murasako rice shop to hang out often, and Munetaka had been good tohim then. He often loaned him a lot of books and helped him with his studies. It'd been a while since he'd seen him or visited the shop, so it was nostalgic, seeing him again.

On the way to the tatami room, they passed by the side of the Japanese style living room. The one to bob her head down at him was Munetaka's wife, Chizuko. Chizuko had two children, a boy and a girl, seated at either side.

"Hiromi-kun and Chika-chan have grown, haven't they."

Haven't they? Munetaka laughed walking ahead of him down the corridor. "I guess the last time you saw her, Chika hadn't even started kindergarten yet,

huh? She's a second grader already. Kids in the lower grades are amazing, you know. They grow right before your eyes and their personality starts coming out."

Just as he was answering, they do don't they, Seishin met the youngest son coming down from the second story. The third son was Masao. He was Munetaka's younger brother by more than ten years, so back when Seishin came, he was still a small child.

Masao looked to Seishin and averted his eyes. Whether he bowing to him in recognition or just hunching into himself, he passed by with a motion that didn't really seem to be one or the other.

"Masao, not going to say hello?" Munetaka called after him but he only fleetingly looked back and gave no response. He was getting to that age where they were reticent towards their family.

"He has gotten big. Is he already in highschool?"

"Second year," Munetaka said with a strained smile. "While his frame is getting bigger, he's not really growing at all. It's because mother and dad spoiled him, he's so hard to handle now."

It's natural, Munetaka said with an embarrassed seeming smile. "I get it ever since I became a father, your youngest child's just so precious and all. It's not like your older kids aren't precious but I guess you'd say they have something more weak and protectable you'd call it? He was a kid who was born right around the time we were losing our cuteness and all, looking at it from their view, that's what made him so cute, thinking about it now."

"That may have been it."

"Yup," Munetaka nodded, putting his hand on the sliding screen door. "Dad, it's the Junior Monk."

"Aa, thanks for bringing him," Munehide said as he stood. It seemed he was in the middle of having an evening drink alone. His drink-reddened face was disheveled as he pushed to have a beer first, but he refused, saying he came by car. And yet all the more he urged the drink on him, until Munetaka scolded him, at which point he became amusingly sullen. Munehide was already around his 60th or so? When people got to that age, something about them became

childish again.

He gave his thanks to Munetaka for leading him in, as well as to Chizuko for bringing in tea cakes. Once he was alone with Munehide, Seishin quietly broached the subject.

"....I had heard that Saeki Akira-san had died, but."

Munehide nodded with a dizzied face. "Right, right! He did die! Did the Junior Monk know him?"

"Not well enough that I could say that I do, but," Seishin said turninghis eyes away with a guilty thought. He'd heard notice of his death through Ishida. Seishin didn't even know that a man named Saeki Akira existed at all. "I'd overheard it from others that it was a great surprise."

"Mm. It was sudden. No, but I guess I didn't know him that well either. His funeral group was Kami-Sotobas, so I didn't manage his funeral, so."

"Was he sick from long before?"

"Nope. Seems it was something sudden. In the middle of the night he suddenly said his stomach hurt---it seems it was actually his heart that was bad. There're times people've made that mistake, their heart hurting and thinking it's their stomach. His family didn't know that, so they tried giving him stomach medicine and seeing where it went but something seemed off. So they took him to the hospital where it came out that it was his heart, and the next day he'd died." Munehide said, seeming to be brooding, somewhat. "The family was surprised but... Maybe it's possible he himself knew he'd had symptoms for a while now. He suddenly quit his job and all."

Seishin started. "You are saying that he had resigned?"

"Yup. Three days before he collapsed. He came back to the house and suddenly just spit out that he'd quit. His parents and his wife were, as expected, surprised. He didn't consult with them about nothing, they pressed on him and cross examined him but he said he'd already turned in his notice, and afterwards it exploded. It seems he said he wanted to take it easy for a while, wanted to rest, he was saying, I guess. So, his body might have been in bad shape after all."

Seishin was bewildered. The reason Seishin was visiting Munehide was because

he wanted to know about Saeki's latest actions. Who he associated with, where he interacted, whether there was something in common with the other patients or not. At to that end, most questionings had been fruitless. Aside from cases when they were members of the same family, the fellow patients largely had no common point of contact. Nothing that could be definitively called it could be found. None the less, suddenly Shimizu Ryuuji, Hirosawa Takatoshi, Ohkawa Shigeru, three people other than Saeki had just before death abruptly resigned from their jobs. What could it mean that amongst all of them who had nothing in common, this was the single thing that could be called a commonality?

"Uhm, lately, there was another who had died too, hasn't there? In Sotoba."

"Aa," Munehide nodded. "Takami-san, right? Now that you mention it, that was sudden too, huh? Down to suddenly being bed ridden."

"That person didn't also.... he didn't quit his job, did he?"

Hidemasa blinked, making as if there were something strange in his mouth, a complicated expression. "That's right... Takami-san's place, too, were saying he had quit. He wasn't very committed to his job either, was he? There were problems at his wife's home family's place and he looked for a job, earnestly asked to move in, but I guess they couldn't take it after all and he quit, they said. So it looks like he did quit. ---Right, that was also right before he died. They said it like it was just a few days before, at the service."

Seishin was panicked. The common point between the dead---resignation. The exceptions were Shuuji, Mikiyasu, Ohtsuka Yasuyuki, those who took part in independent businesses within Sotoba.

(...Those who commute out of the village.)

What could this be? There were two groups of victims, those who commuted from the village and those who didn't, and the commuter group had mostly quit their jobs just before death. ---No, Seishin thought. The only exception was Ohta Kenji but Ohta also turned in a letter of resignation. He was just dissuaded from leaving.

"What does it mean, all this?" Munehide made a bewildered face. "I'm just realizing it now but it's a funny story, now ain't it?"

Seishin nodded, vaguely. Hidemasa mumbled to himself.

"Somehow lately I'm getting a strange feeling. There're so many funerals and all...." Hidemasa said, then looked at Seishin. "The resident officer Takami-san died too. I'm getting the feeling it's an awful lot. Doesn't the Junior Monk think so too?"

"That.... may be the case. I suppose?"

"It's a lot. That's, this summer's been hot but is it enough for this many to die's the question, isn't it? It's not just in the Sotoba district either, lately I've been hearing there is or there was a funeral here or there, you know, from customers. ---You don't think." Hidemasa made a severe expression as he seemed to be peering into Seishin's face. "it's a plague, do you?"

"It couldn't be," Seishin said with a painful smile. "No one who has died has died of a plague, have they?"

"That's true enough, but."

"If it were an epidemic, the hospital would surely say as much. They couldn't not tell the families and depending on the case the families would be quarantined. Even if the families would keep it quiet, it it were on the death certificate, the town hall wouldn't give permission for them to be buried."

"Aa," Hidemasa nodded as if still not satisfied. "Well, that's true, now."

"It is true that there are many dead, but..."

"It feels strange. Even though it's obvious there's no epidemic spreading, people are dying left and right. Two of those dead both quit with their companies and the like. It's been unusually hot and no rain. This year's strange... or maybe it'd be better to say it's the village, huh? This village is a little strange these days. Sudden move-ins and outs and all." Hidemasa said with a complicated smile. "Just around here two households have moved. Somehow, it's like we're being abandoned, now don't it?"

Come to think of it, Seishin had heard that some family from Monzen had moved. It seemed Ohsawa from the post office had also moved, the police substation's Takami's family had moved out and was gone. When he'd visited the Ohtsuka sawmill, he'd heard that---.

Seishin tilted his head. Something was rising up that he couldn't satisfy in his chest, the feeling of something stopping up his throat. It was just like when Megumi and Gotouda Fuki had died, the vague sense of the abnormality that he had felt.

For the time being he asked Munehide the things that he could ask of him, then Seishin took his leave of the Murasako house. A bit uncertain, he stopped his car before the temple. Getting out of the car, Seishin peered into the Tamos' inner parlor. Entering through the back gate he'd never remembered everbeing closed, he went along the wall across the garden, towards Tamo Sadaichi's bedroom. In a quiet drawing room that faced the back yard, Sadaichi was indulging in his retirement.

"Sadaichi-san."

Called out to, the man who had an open book while facing a go board looked up. "Well, Junior Monk."

The Tamo household were typical part-time farmers. Sadaichi had been a grade school principal until the age of compulsory retirement, and his son was a teacher at Sotoba middle school. The farm land that made up for the cost of food was tended to by Sadaichi's wife Kiyo as if it were a hobby but originally the Tamos were Sotoba's first or second richest farmers. Not only did they rent out excess farm and mountain land, they owned several of the rented shops in Sotoba's shopping district and several houses, and a few apartment buildings in Mizobe as well. By all rights with the rentals alone they could have lived a life of leisure but it didn't seem that the man himself, nor his family for that matter, had any intent to live that way.

"I am sorry for the late hour of the night. It is at last becoming cooler, isn't it?" said Seishin, to which Sadaichi smiled 'really!'

"Well, do come up. What is it?"

I had a small something I had wished to inquire about, Seishin said, and without asking further Sadaichi soon was in the kitchen attached to the inner parlor. From there he returned with tea he had brewed himself.

"Tea brewed by an old man may not suit your tastes but it's a bit much to call my wife in from the main wing. Either way, tea brewed by an old woman

wouldn't be on much of a higher level, so you'll just have to forgive me."

Please do not fuss over me, Seishin laughed.

This old man laughing amicably was a current leader of Sotoba. Current day Sotoba had administrative wards that were called school districts; there were six of them---Yamairi was formerly one of them but in the present day it was amalgamated into Monzen--and in each a single named individual was elected to be the ward head. Then the six headmen were called the Ward Headman's Association and they elected a chairman, and this ward headman's association's headman was this man, Tamo Sadaichi. At the temple he served as the Parish Representative Committee's president, and on Sotoba's JA's board of directors. At the same time he was also the Shrine Parish Representative's head and the shrine's head priest. Sadaichi was that sort of old man.

"Somehow lately, there's been a hustle and a bustle, hasn't there? I guess it's been some time since I'd been able to meet with the Junior Monk face to face, now. How are things? At the temple."

"...Well thanks to you, thank you for asking," Seishin said while at the same time adding in. "Our Mitsuo-san had been saying that some place in Monzen had had a move recently but, Sadaichi-san, might you perhaps know of which family it may have been?"

"Ah, the Matsuos, yes?" Sadaichi replied immediately. Leader of the village though he was, it wasn't as if every minute detail of the village reached his notice. Even so, if it was relating to Monzen, there was approximately nothing that did not reach Sadaichi's ears. "You know, Sakaimatsu. "

Ah, Seishin murmured. Sakaimatsu was Matsuo's trade name. Their estates were just on the border of Monzen and Kami-Sotoba, so they were called the Matsuos of the border, sakai.

"They have moved? Sakaimatsu?"

"That they did. Their boy was called Takashi, did the Junior Monk know of him? If I recall, he was a wee bit older than the Junior Monk, but..."

"Aa---Yes. I do know of him."

"That Takashi-kun went flying out of here saying that he was transferred away

at his job but, that was an outright lie."

"...Ha?"

"I'm saying that he himself said he had been transferred when he left with his wife and kids but after that we never heard back like they were cut off. Sakaimatsu's Yasushi-san was worried and called to contact his company but far from being transferred, they said that he had quit."

Seishin was instantly startled.

"Without a word to his family, he went and quit. That's what they call absconding, and Yasushi-san was red with shame. He came to me for advice but he had said that things being what they were to please keep it a secret, so I've kept it quiet myself.

"About when might this have happened?"

"At the start of September. ---And then, it seems Takashi-kun did make contact. I don't know what lead to it turning out like this but at any rate he said he was going to his son's place and the family all moved out. That was just recently on the 18th."

"...That is a strange story, isn't it."

"Inn't it?" Sadaichi said adding hot water to the tea pot. "What's more, one day, there was a truck stopped out in front ofthwer house, and when I asked the neighbor Morihiro-san's wife about it, that's how she answered. If the wife hadn't asked, did he plan to move without any goodbyes, then? Yasushi-san is a conscientious person but, he must have had quite the circumstances going on." Sadaichi refilled the tea cups, making a sullen face. "That's another story that happened at night. And then? Well, around the neighborhood, there's talk about how they might've been flying away by night, but. Perhaps Takashi-kun borrowed money from someplace scary, they said, and maybe he had to run away from that, they said."

Is that so, Seishin said looking into the face of the good natured old man that was Sadaichi. "Sadaichi-san, lately, have there not been any other households that have moved?"

Sadaichi looked at him blankly and murmured, let's see. "Come to think, at the

end of August, the Kamiyasu's old woman moved, didn't she? Something about moving to start living with her son or something. I heard about something like that happening in Kami-Sotoba too. At Sadaji's place, his son-in-law said that, if I recall."

Sadaichi's younger brother Sadaji ran a super market in Kami-Sotoba

"....Looking at it like this, there are a lot aren't there? Recently." Sadaichi made a befuddled expression.

"It looks like it, doesn't it? I've heard how so many houses now have moved, just in Sotoba. And that's just lately. And so, Sadaichi-san, I am terribly sorry but since it has become an occasion on which I was able to meet with you, could I perhaps bother you to ask about indirectly how many have moved lately?"

"That's---I don't mind, but. What is this, is there something to it?"

"It is only something that is on my mind. I was thinking whether something was happening, so."

"Something?"

No, Seishin prevaricated, quickly faking the conversation in a new direction. "Uhm---wasn't it last summer, that the person from the research group had been coming to Sotoba frequently?"

Aa, Sadaichi nodded. "Now that you mention it, there was something like that. Building a resort facility or some such, he said. A golf ground or camp grounds, saying some kind of baloney, but hadn't that talk died out?"

"---Yes, I was but asking."

Hmm, Sadaichi folded his arms. "Certainly so. There are many coming and going, aren't there? I don't think it could be anything, but it certainly is interesting. I understand. I'll ask about indirectly."

"I am sorry, thank you very much."

Nodding, Sadaichi breathed a sigh. "What is going on, I wonder. ....Junior Monk, lately, do not you think it strange?"

Seishin was secretly in panic. "About... the movers?"

"There is that too. Somehow, I get the feeling there are many funerals. After good old Giichi, the wife at the contractors was next, wasn't she? Their boy passed on too, Mikiyasu-kun died too, the three generations of the contractors' family, even though they got along so good, are down to just Tokujirou and Setsuko-san all by themselves."

"Yes... that is true, isn't it?"

"The resident officer Takami-san died, too---come to think of it, the post office's Ohsawa-san moved too. Aa, and the library's Yuzuki-san also quit. Did you know that?"

Seishin blinked. "No. He has quit his job?"

"That's right, he has. It was another sudden story. It was already some time ago. Was it at the end of August, the start of September? Now Sumie-san who works at the nursery center is trying to learn to run the library, but."

Sadaichi lightly shook his head looking away. "Just the other day--about two days ago was it, the principal at the grade school quit too it seems. He'd had kidney failure, they were deciding whether to do dialysis or not, and that became worse and worse, and he had to resign in the middle of the school year. This is like... people are coming out like an old person's worn out teeth, is what it feels like."

Seishin nodded while feeling a faint, vague apprehension. The village was mostly made up of people who conducted their business within the village but there were my no means no people like Yuzuki and like the grade school principal who commuted to work by coming into the village. There were more who went out from the village to work.

(....Commute.)

Ohta Kenji, Hirosawa Takatoshi, Shimizu Ryuuji, Ohkawa Shigeru, Saeki, Takashima. Each of them worked outside of the village and resigned before they died. Yuzuki, the grade school principal, as expected they who quit commuted from outside of the village.

(Gigorou-san.)

Ohkawa Gigorou went out of the village and when he came back he was sick.

What am I thinking, Seishin thought while lightly furrowing his brows. What is this. It's like---it was like something outside of the village was closing in around the village.

An epidemic was spreading within the village. That's how it should have been. And yet, why was it that like this it seemed there was something outside of the village?

----Oni.

(....Such a stupid thought.)

But, it was clear as a picture. The triangle like the tip of a harpoon. The forest of firs that enveloped the village. Surrounding the village from the outside, oni were peeking in on the village from here and there.

The village is surrounded by death.

Seishin took his leave of Sadaichi as if intoxicated by something, returned to the temple and called Ishida from the town hall.

"Ishida-san, I am sorry but I'd like the register of names for those who have moved."

Ha, Ishida's bewildered voice sounded.

"A basic resident register or something along those lines, could you see if there is anything along those lines? ---I am depending on you."

sinnesspiel

3

Friday, Toshio received word from the National Hospital in Mizobe that Katou Yoshihide whom he'd had transported in had died late last night.

Before lunch time, Gyouda Etsuko from Kami-Sotoba came in to the hospital. She too had apparent anemia. He prescribed iron supplements and vitamins, an antibiotic, and just in case a full blood transfer. It was a literal shot in the dark.

"Lately it's like the doctor has become totally high-string."

The one to say that over lunchbreak was Shiomi Yuki.

"It isn't like I don't understand though," Yasuyo was the one to say. "It's busy isn't it, lately. And without anything to show for it."

That's right, said Kiyomi nodding. She opened her catered and delivered lunch box and sighed. "It's because the essential patients aren't coming in until it gets bad."

"But, that the doctor would shout at the patients, I was surprised," Isaki Satoko added with her own sigh. "Ah, it's making me so nervous now, I'd thought then."

"Katou Yoshihide-san? ....That's right," Yasuyo nodded. "He was told that he was given a decoction because it was a cold... That'd just make him want to fall right over!"

"Is that how it is?" It was Towada who asked. Yasuyo shrugged her shoulders.

"The truth is there is no such illness as a cold. We say cold-like symptoms, these days. It's actually an upper respiratory inflammation. It's inflammation that occurs in the upper half of the respiratory tract. Cold air or allergies can stimulate an inflammation but most of the time it's viral inflammation isn't it? If that's the case then no matter how much you drink of any medicine, it won't help."

"Heh."

"In the case of a cold, there's nothing you can do but recuperate. Eat, sleep, and build up your strength. What they call cold medicine is something to help with that. Since there isn't any particular medicine for attacking a cold, taking it shouldn't be enough to put your mind at ease. But, the elderly especially tend to think it's something that can be cured by taking something. They say 'one shot of this will do it!' Even though you won't get better no matter how much medicine you take if you don't recuperate."

"That's right," Towada said with a forced smile. "There are things like that in every family. Old family remedies, they call them."

"Right, right," Yasuyo laughed. "Cooking egg nog or garlic; those are, well, at least useful for warming the body up and raising your constitution, it's not useless, but some of them have ridiculous things in them! The 'old family remedy' is by no means the panacea it's expected to be. But they think that whether it's a cold or a stomachache, it can cure anything and everything, don't they! Then when you take off the lid and see what it is, it's medicine for women's ailments!"

The nurses crumbled into laughter.

"Well, as long as it's not made of anything harmful, it's medicine for the mind, which can be a good thing in itself. But, that's only if you also have proper recuperation. It wasn't something that was fine with just taking medicine and resting; whatever his state, she should have seen that it had gotten worse than the day before, should have made sure he was eating well, she should have seen the significance in that and noticed, you would normally notice something was strange before cyanosis occurs, wouldn't you? Ultimately, I think it must have been that attitude: 'if you take this medicine it will all be okay' and dropping your guard that did it."

"I see, that'd do it."

"Even so, it's no use yelling at the patients or their families. But, as far as his feelings, I can't say I don't understand. Lately we've been so busy. On top of that, so many are dying off one after another like this, so isn't it all for nothing? If the patients at least cooperated and it was no good even with their help, we could

move on, but."

"But really, they are increasing lately, aren't they? Not just the deaths but the patients."

Towada looked to Mutou. Mutou made a sullen face as he nodded. "In the end, everyone's uneasy. The number of deaths recently just isn't normal. It looks like it's becoming a rumor that there might be some kind of bad disease going around, so even if they'd normally sleep it off, they can't relax until they've been seen by the doctor, like, I guess."

"And on the other hand, we have the people who take a decoction and keep an eye on it."

"It's a tough one on all of us, this disease," Yasuyo brought her teacup to her mouth. "After all it looks like the ones affected go into a daze and don't make a big fuss. If the person complained that this hurts, if they answered how this or that was feeling, we know that it is what it is and don't need to worry. But, the person themselves doesn't seem to notice they're sick, do they? Thanks to that lately we've been able to tell by looking at their faces."

That's true, Kioymi nodded. "They look like it's somebody elses problem."

"Right, right. So we're depending on their families. People look but don't really see more often than you'd expect, even at their own family's faces."

"That's true."

"Do you think Gyouda Etsuko-san may have it, too?"

To Ritsuko's questions, Yasuyo nodded. "Probably, yes? She had that face."

Looming silence fell over the break room. For them the word 'it' meant a hopeless disease someone was presently suffering and couldn't be saved from.

"Kinda... scary, isn't it?" Yuki alone spoke, plunging them into a deeper silence. As they all let out a sigh, the phone rang. Ritsuko who was nearest answered it.

"Uhmm, this is Takano, but." The voice on the other end said. It was the part-timer Takano Fujyou. She had called first thing in the morning to say she would be taking the day off. "The doctor is out now, isn't he?"

"Right now he's with a patient. Shall I call him?"

"Aa... then, it's fine," Fujyou said, falteringly. "Uhm... Could you relay something to the doctor for me? ...I, was thinking that I'd like to be allowed to quit there, today."

"Fujyou-san?"

"I'm sorry, I really am sorry when you're busy. But, I just can't take it, being so scared, so afraid..."

Ritsuko had no words. Fujyou had always complained of her uneasine. And, with the situation increasing in scale, she showed no signs of coming to ease.

"So many people one after another are dying! When I think that, why, I might be next, I..."

Ritsuko didn't have any words to offer in return. She could by no means blame Fujyou. Even if she tried to forget the sense of dread from being on the front lines, it wasn't something one could forget. If that was the case for Ritsuko and the nurses, then it must be all the more for Fujyou who came to clean and do odd jobs.

"The doctor says it's all right but the truth is he doesn't know if it's all right, does he? When I take out the garbage or some such, I think, what if a needle is sticking out, and my heart just races! So..."

".... Yes, ma'am."

"I'm so sorry."

"I will inform the doctor."

Please do, Fujyou said, hanging up the phone. Ritsuko hung up the phone and looked over all of the faces, which were giving her a dubious look.

"It was Fujyou-san. ...It seems she has quit. She's afraid, she says."

Kiyomi breathed a heavy sigh. "It can't really be helped, can it? We can't say it'll be all right--that's an empty promise we can't really give."

Everyone nodded wordlessly. ---They could not do but nod.

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4

On Saturday Toshio drove his car towards Kami-Sotoba. Searching for Gyouda's house with a vague memory, his car drove onto their property. A dried up, wrinkly old man in front of the shed stood looking surprised. It was likely Etsuko's husband Bungo.
"Junior Doctor!"
"How is Etsuko-san's condition?" Toshio asked as he stepped out of the car.
Gyouda nodded, his back hunched.
"Haa..." Gyouda answered seeming bewildered. "Thanks to you, today she seems good..."
"Good?" Toshio looked at Gyouda's face. "Is she sleeping right now?"
"Who knows... just a bit ago, she was cleaning up after lunch, but."
"So she's in a state where she can clean up," he said, to which Gyouda gave a leisurely nod. "I'm sure I told her to come first thing in the morning, but?"
Gyouda blinked as if he didn't know what he'd meant. "Uhm.... but, today you are closed."
"Yes. Saturday's a national holiday. But still she was told to come. You didn't hear that from Etsuko-san?"
"Haa...."
Leaving behind Gyouda who seemed to be nothing but bewildered, Toshio started on his own towards the entryway. Heading inside he called out, and shortly after Etsuko had come out, looking as if doing so were troublesome for her.
"Oh my, Junior Doctor..."
"No, not 'oh my.' Why did you not come even though you had an appointment made?"
"But," Etsuko said sitting on the raised door frame, blinking. "I feel well today."
"That's not what it's about. I had said let us look at how it progresses, did I not?

If you do not come as you are supposed to, it is a problem for me."
"Yes. Uhm... Pardon me."
Toshio was irritated. While Gyouda and Etsuko showed no signs of any sense of impending danger at all, his own nerves were on edge. Enough to make him want to just tell them everything in one outburst. Etsuko had that very disease. Etsuko was without a doubt in an outbreak. And to day, none who had had an outbreak had been cured. Within a few days all of them were dead.
Rather than spitting out all of that, Toshio let out a sigh.
"-----And, you're feeling well, aren't you?"
Etsuko gave a seemingly slow, stupid like nod. It seemed she was still spaced out.
Toshio sat himself down on the frame with her, holding his hand out to Etsuko. Taking her pulse it was indeed lower than yesterday. Her color was also better than yesterday.
Iron supplements, vitamins, and antibiotics had shown no effect to this point. If so, was the full blood transfusion what was working?
"Indeed, you are a little better. I'm taking blood."
"Haa....." Etsuko seemed indeed very unwilling in holding out her arm. He preemptively took the blood sample. With that done, Toshio tried to press upon her.
"It'd be better for you not to let your guard down. Even though you're more or less feeling good, don't decide for yourself that you're cured. Come in again tomorrow, all right?"
"But.... tomorrow is."
"It's fine. Tomorrow morning. If that's too much trouble then the afternoon's fine too. Either way, be sure to come. If you don't come, I'll be intruding again."
Haa, Etsuko nodded. Gyouda who stood in the entryway watched the scene, dumbfounded.

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5

"Junior Monk," said Tamo Sadaichi coming to the temple just as Seishin was deep in his own room researching something. Sadaichi who had a long standing relationship with the temple came in as far as the office without particularly bothering with calling out. He also frequently came across the yard to poke his face into the living room.

"Ah, good day. ---No, good evening, is it now?"

"Right now is good for you, isn't it? I'm sure you must be busy over Higan, and I know you must be eager to rest but, it's about yesterday's matter."

Seishin nodded and pulled out a seating cushion to offer to Sadaichi. Sadaichi wore a grimace as he settled into place.

"How was it?"

"How was it nothing. What's happening, here in this village. I tried asking here and there and, well, if I wasn't surprised. Probably since this number the number of houses that have moved are greater than twenty! The number of people are decreasing with a surprising vigor!"

As suspected, Seishin murmured in his mind. Sadaichi put out his notes.

"I've come with what I've heard so far but in actuality, there are many, many more, I do believe."

Seishin took the notepad and his eyes fell over the names recorded. A total of 22 households had moved. In the list were names Seishin had never recalled seeing before but many were parish families. Normally in this village, when someone of the parish changed residences, word would be given to the temple. None the less, even from those on the list who were parishioners he hadn't heard that they were moving.

"This many..."

"Just what's happening do you think? All the families suddenly moving out. About the old woman of Hasekura, do you know of her, Junior Monk?"

"Yes."

Hasekura Itoko was an old woman who lived alone in Kami-Sotoba who frequently came to morning services. Thinking back, he hadn't seen her face in some time.

"It seemed that she was saying she was going to live with her son and then left, so it went, yes? But the old woman had a big fight with her son and his wife in the past. They originally did live together but the wife ran out and her son went away with her was how it went, wasn't it? Well, she may have made up with his wife, or perhaps things went sour between the son and his wife but if that were the case he would come back here. To say she'll be living with him, so suddenly."

Seishin nodded. The antagonism between Hasekura Itoko and the wife was rather famous. After all on the occasion of their fight, the wife had wielded a kitchen knife in her frenzy. That said, it wasn't that she had attacked Itoko; she had grabbed the knife and went running out screaming that she was going to die, so the story went, but it was nevertheless an incident that had been worth talking about within the village. After that the son took his wife and left the home and, angry over that, Itoko had mostly cut ties, he had heard.

"If she herself says so it must be the case but.... but, it is strange, isn't it?"

"Isn't it? Same as the Sakaimatsu case, it's an odd story. I was surprised when I heard it as well. Things like this do happen, I guess is how it goes."

"That is true...."

To begin with an old person living alone in the village had circumstances that went beyond being a matter of their wishes, and indeed she'd had a reason which was why she remained alone in the village. Of course if those circumstances changed living together became a possibility, which seemed to be the case but that it wasn't connected to the numbers moving out in such a short time was a bit hard to believe.

"Come to think of it, have you heard that the wife of the San'Yasu family ran

away?"

"San'Yasu---do you mean Yasumori Seiichirou-san of Naka-Sotoba?"

Yes, Sadaichi nodded. "The wife is called Hinako you see and when they woke up in the morning, they say she wasn't there! That household too was like old woman Hasekura's, Maiko obaa-san and the wife didn't get along well either, so the bunch in Naka-Sotoba thought that it might turn out like it did at the Hasekuras' but it looks like it was the wife who threw out the husband and ran away."

"There is no chance that it was an accident or some such?"

"Doesn't seem to be. Not since they were all together when they went to bed. Even though they were sleeping beside each other, when they awoke in the morning the futon was like an empty shed skin, the wife nowhere to be seen in the home. In the middle of the night she gathered her luggage and left it looks like. This too was a surprising story."

"So it is..."

In the middle of the night, Seishin ruminated in his mind. It pulled terribly at his chest.

"Did Hasekura-san move in the night?"

"Can't say. It seems there were folks who had seen her say she was moving in with her son and gathering her bags but when she actually did move out it seems they don't right know. That old woman is just a little bit eccentric, so it seems there wasn't anybody too close with her. Her house is in the community of Kami-Sotoba, a little out of the way. It probably happened the next day or a few days later, I'd imagine."

Is that so, Seishin murmured. What was it, this somehow unconvinced feeling?

"Well, there are a lot of elderly living on their own. There are plenty of holdsholds like Kami-Sotoba's Shinoda where the parents and children live together too, but. More importantly, look here." Sadaiichi bent forward to point on the note. "On top of Shita's Old Lady Yasumori, the Maebara's Setsu-san, and the old man from Inoda too. Naka-Sotoba's Mimura."

Seishin looked to Sadaichi, having difficulty following his meaning when Sadaichi nodded towards something. "With this, the real end of Yamairi is only natural, too."

"---Eh?"

"See, those Mimuras in Naka-Sotoba, they own the mountains under Yamairi, don't they? Just at the other side of the northern mountain. The old man worked hard to keep going into the mountains even now. That is until his son changed jobs, they said; the five in the family have moved now. Yasumori's Misuzu-san owned all of the mountains of Yamairi itself. It looks like she's stopped working the mountains though. When the old man her husband died, it was quite the payment in kind. Maebara's Setsu-san owns the area with the woodland path, doesn't she? It seems Setsu-san too had stopped working the mountains but Maruyasu would come bit by bit to cut down the trees still. At the end of that woodland path is the mountain area owned by old Inoda-san. The old man still earned his bread in the mountains."

Seishin furrowed his brows.

"With this, there's basically nobody left who goes into the mountains. All that's left are the mountains either abandoned or used as payment in kind. The three from Yamairi have died too, with nobody coming and going, it's the same as if the place called Yamairi didn't exist anymore at all! --Well, that old man of the Inodas, he'd always said he'd be at it until he died but, after something like that happened, it'd feel unsettling, I'm sure he didn't feel like going into the mountains anymore. Lately, there've been a lot of wild dogs in the mountains too. Before, there was someone who'd been bitten and severely injured by being bitten by a wild dog, wasn't there? I wonder if that was finally the last straw for him to give it up?" Sadaichi said, breathing a deep sigh. "This too might be a sign of the times. Until now this village didn't feel too much like it was shrinking. Despite people saying depopulation, depopulation, in Sotoba, there were plenty of people left. I'd thought it was something special but I guess you can't buck the trends. But with that said, when people are dropping out one after another, how to put it, well, doesn't it feel more complicated?"

That is true, Seishin answered while having the feeling his understanding was growing dimmer. He couldn't put it into words well. Something he couldn't

comprehend was right before his eyes, as if luring him into vertigo. The mounting number of deaths, dread of an illness, and the movers should have had some connection between them. None the less, it was as if people were synchronized in leaving the village. Whether they were dead or moving, different as they were, it made no difference in how much it decreased the resident population. He had the feeling it meant something but what meaning---what connection could he say there was? They couldn't have noticed the disease and been fleeing from it, their mobilization was too sudden for that.

Thinking as he saw Tamo off, Seishin came to a sudden realization and set out by car.

Anything and everything was failing to come together. It might not have been a bad idea to go back to where it all started to try to think it over fresh. Everything started in Yamairi. That was the only thing for certain. If he tried going to Yamairi, he might find something, he thought vaguely.

Feeling admittedly as if his mood were bringing on the clouds, driving towards Yamairi, Seishin couldn't help but be terrified all over again.

---The road, gone.

Part way along the cut out road to Yamairi, a landslide had occurred, a considerable span of the roadway stopped off. The road that Seishin had traveled not even two months ago at most had vanished. It must have been the rain some time ago. The brief rainfall was amazing but it wasn't exactly a rain bringing great blessings to the area's water supply. They had said that the dried slopes were caving in everywhere from the heavy rain.

Was Yamairi this isolated, he thought solemnly. Beyond the dirt and sand of the mountain, an uncounted number of small lights flickered. The lights like reflectors may have been the eyes of small animals. Or they may have been stray dogs.

Seishin clutched the steering will, his jaw set as he gazed at the earth and sand mountain. Of course that the road had disappeared was one, but that nobody had noticed that until now was also a shock. There was the fact that nobody had a need for it anymore. There was also the danger from the infestation of the wild dogs. ----But even so.

Yamairi really did die that day in the boundary. The inhabitants lost, and aside from wild dogs and small woodland animals, it had lost any who would visit. It vanished from people's consciousness and now existed nowhere but in people's memories. It really was like it had died out.

(If I don't report this....)

While thinking that he must report that the road had been blocked off to the town hall, he also thought whether or not that would even have any meaning if he did. A road that had lost those who would travel it was another thing which had died out.

The village is surrounded by death.

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Sakaimatsu - The nickname for the Matsuo family who live in Monzen at the border of Kami-Sotoba. Sakai (境) means border, Matsu (松) is short for Matsuo (松尾), a last name common enough there are likely multiple families with the last name in any given area.

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1

Toshio remained seated in his waiting room, glaring at the clock with growing irritation. Once it was past three, unable to bare it he picked up the phone. He called the Gyouda house. Even though he'd said as much as he did Gyouda Etsuko wasn't coming. Today was Sunday. The hospital wasn't fundamentally open. Gyouda Etsuko was surely well aware of that but this was no time for letting that get to her.

The ringer rang six times. Just as he was thinking of hanging up and trying to go there in person, at last someone picked up. The one to pick up was Gyouda Bungo.

"Ah... Junior Doctor." Gyouda piped in a dismayed voice.

"Well, Etsuko-san hasn't come yet, has she? Did something happen?"

"No," Gyouda hesitated to say, from there speaking timidly. "Uhm, no matter what it may be, we couldn't impose on a Sunday. She herself said she felt guilty, so if you could have her come in on Monday..."

Toshio breathed a sigh. "Gyouda-san, I'm not trying to scare you but it'd be better to keep an eye on that disease of Etsuko-san's. I can't say anything for sure yet but there's a possibility of it getting worse like that. If that happens, with Etsuko-san at her age and all, I could even see it taking a turn for the worst. Even if it is Sunday, I'm telling you to come."

"Haa..."

"If you don't care whether Etsuko-san lives or dies, then fine. If Etsuko-san's fine with that, then do what you want. But, if you're worried about your wife, then during the time you have free to worry, could you not bring her here?"

"But..."

"I'm the one telling you to come to me. I've been waiting here at the hospital

to close since this morning. Maybe you're trying to be considerate to me, and I'm thankful for that but if you're going to be considerate towards me all the same, then coming right here first thing in the morning and setting me free early is a lot more helpful, wouldn't you say?"

I'm sorry, Gyouda said, I'll bring Etsuko there now, he said. Toshio breathed a sigh and hung up the phone, and then felt a tinge of self loathing.

Doctors had no right to order their patients to come. That had to be left to the patient's will. Toshio was the vanguard of the villager's health but it wasn't as if he bore the duty of supervising it, and he by no means the authority to do so effectively. He was irritated with himself for ignoring that and unsparingly ordering her to come. And he was irritated with Gyouda for letting him. And most irritating of all was thinking that giving an order and behaving like this was painfully reminiscent of his father.

Spouting that he was the vanguard of the villager's health, his father behaved as if he saw anything that would bring harm to the villagers in such a way as a personal affront. Injured patients he attacked as careless, sick patients he attacked as neglecting their health and their families as being careless.

Toshio clickedhis tongue. His own behavior was just like that of his father's. That was so unpleasant he couldn't stand it.

(I've got to cool down....)

It couldn't be helped that the villagers weren't carrying any sense of dread. Toshio himself was the one who was hushing up the situation so as not to stir up any useless sense of crisis. If he spit out the situation frankly, Gyouda too would be afraid. To be suppressing that while blaming Gyouda was not coherent reasoning.

While persuading himself of that, a voice called out 'excuse me'. Toshio stood with mild aggitation. He was all the more aggravated at himself for thinking that there was an interphone, and how could he not see it.

When he went to look as expected it was Gyouda, and Etsuko's condition had worsened. Clearly it wasn't as good as it had been yesterday. At that, Toshio's sense of self reproach swelled further at having called her in. Gyouda's feet were unsteady. If this was how it was when she went out walking, Toshio should have

been the one to go. That made Toshio once again displeased. If she was getting worse after all, why didn't he sayas much; and so the target of his anger switched to Gyouda, his irritation getting out of hand. --In truth, Toshio was aware himself that he didn't have control of his own emotions.

Somehow, he managed to let it pass without saying anything, that Etsuko's condition had worsened. For the time being he took a blood and urine sample. Her urine was a dark color, and on top of being dark there wasn't much. Her breathing was mixed with light wheezing. Once again, he did a full blood transfusion. No other medical treatment that appeared to be effective had arisen.

If her condition gets earnestly worse, he ordered for them to call call him and an ambulance. But, as Toshio himself said that, he didn't naively imagine that Etsuko would be saved or any such by it.

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2

When Kaori opened her eyes, it was already close to noon. As she opened the curtain and the window, an Autumn tinted breeze passed through. The temperature was still a far throw from being called cool but the skies seemed higher. Something about the wind felt sharper.

September 25th. It was near the end of September. And seven days from Megumi's 35th day memorial service. Her 6th 7th day service would be on the 42nd day.

Kaori changed her clothes and made an effort to look like she was eating breakfast as Sachiko scolded her for eating slowly.

"Even on Sunday you're not of a mind to help around the hose?" Sachiko scowled at Kaori.

"You're always dragging your feet. Aren't you just using Megumi-chan's death as an excuse to laze about? Just cut it out already!"

That isn't the case, she thought, but Kaori couldn't get the words out. In the end, Megumi's death wasn't anything grave at all according to Sachiko. She she pushed for her to hurry up and clear it away, why she blamed Kaori for never clearing it away.

With some half hearted response to Sachiko's fault finding she returned to her room.

"....But, I won't forget."

Kaori murmured to herself as she sat on the window.

Megumi was her childhood friend. Her best friend. Kaori loved Megumi, so no matter what the adults around her might have tried to say, she wouldn't clear Megumi away. As she'd always remember her, she'd always be sad. She was grieving Megumi's death.

Though she thought that, lately Kaori became aware of a part of herself that seemed as if it were forgetting Megumi's death when not thinking about it. Directly after Megumi's death, everything she looked at made her remember Megumi, she always thought 'if Megumi were here.' Even though just remembering Megumi left her unable to stop her tears from flowing, now unless she remembered Megumi with all her might, the tears wouldn't come.

(....I don't want to.)

She didn't want to clear away and forget Megumi. She didn't want to become like that. Thinking that, she decided to try to cry for Megumi's sake to confirm that part of herself just a little, but that was becoming more difficult.

Kaori bit her lip and pulled Megumi's post card out from her drawer. The carefully written Late Summer Greeting Card, the characters written by the Megumi of her memories.

(....So carefully written.)

Putting her heart into it, and yet she couldn't send it. How much must she regret it?

Hearing that Megumi had died, she rushed to the house but nothing clicked. Kaori who had been in a daze hadn't cried at last until the moment she'd found this post card. When she thought that she had writetn it so carefully, that alone made her tears flow without stopping them. The thirty fifth day was the same. Now she was sad. It was pitiful she thought. Yet why wouldn't the tears come?

Whole heartedly, once again, she turned it about in her heart. If she didn't bite into herself and instruct herself to force it the tears wouldn't come. ---She couldn't feel sad enough for tears to come forth.

(I don't want this.)

To think her sadness had been worn down in only 42 days. That shouldn't have been all right, she earnestly told herself, but the sentiment that rose so high as to once overwhelm her before were no longer coming.

Far from it, looking at the post card like this, a different type of guilt arose. She spastically took it out of Megumi's room on a whim but was this the right thing to do? At the time she'd thought she had to but as time lapsed she didn't

understand why she did such a thing. She remembered being flustered that they were going to clear away Megumi's room, weren't they? Traces of Megumi would be wiped away. Before that, even just one thing would be fine, she had to save some vestige of her but if she thought about it it wasn't necessarily true that Megumi's room would be sorted away.

Her doubts about what she had done may have been because of the conversation with her teacher right after that.

Coincidentally, Kaori was on class duty. Asked to help the English teacher with printouts, she went to the copy room with another student.

"Tanaka-san, you seem less cheerful lately," said that professor---Hirosawa. "Like there's something bothering you."

The one who had said that her friend had died was the other one on duty, Koike Touko. This was the first she'd heard of it but Hirosawa and Megumi's father appared to be friends. She thought she had seen Hirosawa's face at the funeral but she didn't think they had such a connection. It was from that Hirosawa that she'd heard that Megumi's father was incredibly shut down inhis depression. Megumi had the feeling she was saved in some small way by that. She had thought then that not everybody had cleared Megumi away, had wanted to clear her away, and as she stood there at last she realized that Megumi's parents were suffering more than herself without a doubt, she had realized such a natural thing. She had been feeling as if there were nobody in the world more sad over Megumi's death than herself and yet she had come to realize that that had been incredibly arrogant of her.

Even so, so Kaori thought. In that case, they could have at least let Megumi be in the home until the 49th, without pushing up the end of mourning. Since Hirosawa only tilted his head, Kaori told him that she'd thought of the Memorial services as similar to an exorcism.

"Aa... I see." Hirosawa's smile had a complicated feeling. "So, Tanaka-san felt like Megumi-chan was being driven out of the house."

But, said Hirosawa said to the nodding Kaori. "That's a bit of a misunderstanding."

"....Misunderstanding?"

"Mm. When a person dies, for 49 days, they're trapped in the border between this world and that one. Well, we say it's the border but since we don't well know where it is, we speak as if they're in the family altar at the time. Even while you could say that's in the home, indeed it is something that is situated in the home, they've died and are no longer in this world anymore, but they can't yet go to that world. In other words, their destination hasn't been decided yet."

"Destination?"

"Right. You've not heard of the circle of transmigration, have you? People transmigrate through six worlds, you see. They die and are reborn, cycling round and round. The dead person's next life is decided based on how they lived their former one. Every seven days a trial is held about that, you see." Hirosawa said with a gentle smile. "The point is, they're drawn out before Enma-sama so it's said. Every seven days they're called out and an investigation occurs. If they were bad in their previous lives, they'll fall into a so-called hell but if their prior life's doings were good, they go to the Pure Land. In cases where they're not quite good enough to go to the Pure Land, they are reborn as a human once again to redo their learnings."

"As a human....?"

"Right. Since it's reincarnation through the six realms, it's called the endless transmigration of the six realms. There are six worlds: Hell, Preta, Beast, Asura, Human and Heaven. So a memorial service, you see? It's undertaken to plead that they can get even just a little better judgement, to quickly put an end to it and to please let them go on to the Pure land."

Kaori gave a dazed nod. When she looked to Koike Touko, Touko's face looked as if she'd known about it well.

"Touko-chan, you knew?"

"Mm. My grandpa's a mourning crew mediator after all! I've been hearing all about that stuff since I was little."

Hirosawa smiled. "If a conclusion isn't reached in 49 days, it seems it's carried out after 100 days, on the first anniversary of their death, and the third anniversary of their death. Staying in the boundary for too long---in bardo, chuuin or chiin, isn't by any means a good thing. Of course, for the deceased it's

good to quickly get a good verdict. So, that's why the family holds the memorial services, praying that the deceased receives divine protection for a quick and good verdict, offering up readings of Buddhist scriptures in the dead's place, offering alms to add to the dead's favor and good will."

Is that how it was, Kaori thought, feeling as if a demon had been exorcised from her. Nobody--least of all Megumi's parents--were trying to drive Megumi out. They weren't trying to forget her or to clear her away.

When she understood that, her own actions were stupid, rash, she thought. Why did she feel so much even now like Megumi's room was going to be lost. She had thought that everything Megumi treasured was going to be perfunctorily thrown out, but, was that really something Megumi's family would have done?

When she thought of that, she was ashamed of what she had done. Even so, Megumi wouldn't have wanted her parents to see this post card. That alone saved her. That said, Megumi probably didn't want Kaori to have ownership of it like this either. Thinking as if it were herself---she'd want it either sent to the given address, or if not that, then she had a feeling she'd want it disposed of where nobody would see it.

(What should I do...)

Since that day Kaori had thought about what she should do countless times while looking at the postcard. Of course she couldn't return it to Megumi's parents now, and she had the feeling that wasn't what she should do. Should she try to return it to where it was? But, what could she say to be let into Megumi's room? Would it be better if she disposed of it in Megumi's place? Or---.

Kaori gazed at the recipient's name.

The late summer greeting card she wrote for him. She only wrote it, Megumi died without being able to send it. Even though she wrote it so carefully.

(Megumi... you wanted to send this, didn't you?)

She tried murmuring that more firmly in her heart but indeed the tears wouldn't come anymore.

But it was probably certain she had wanted to send it. That was why Megumi

wrote it.That was the very reason that she had thought to try to give it to the recipient at the funeral. But the person himself said he didn't want it.

(You loved that terrible of a person?)

He wasn't even the slightest bit sad about Megumi's death. Even though Megumi put so much thought into it, so that she wanted to give it to him, far from being happy about it, Natsuno seemed incredibly burdened.

(I'm not exactly close with Shimizu, he said... Even though Megumi liked him that much.)

It was unforgivable of Natsuno to treat Megumi's feelings, of Megumi's death so lightly.

Kaori continued to gaze, fixated on the post card.

---Send it. He has an obligation to accept this.

That's good, Kaori though as she stood. It was better than her having it, better than disposing of it. Megumi herself probably wanted to send it and all, and even Natsuno might have realized Megumi's feelings if he saw it. He might understand how terrible a thing he said.

Kaori went downstairs. Her mother was trying to voice more complaints to her but without paying it any mind she went outside. Jogging down the path she had gone down and gotten used to so many times she came beside Megumi's house. The post office was right next to Megumi's house.

(Even though it's only this far.)

Megumi was sick enough that she couldn't walk this distance. Suddenly, she had gotten worse, and then finally....

Kaori took one last look at the face of the post card. She hesitated a bit on putting that in the post box. She had thought that she wanted things to be easier on her by doing this.

It wasn't as if she couldn't handle it. Megumi wanted this, so she would do it in her place. She had some difficulty convincing herself of this. What made the postcard drop from her fingertips was a voice calling out from behind her.

"---Kaori?"

It was Akira's voice. Surprised, Kaori released the postcard and it fell into the bottom of the post box. Making as if to follow after it, Akira poked his face in from Kaori's side.

"Aaaah. Why're you sending out a late summer greeting card now? You do know it's September now?"

Startled, Kaori gazed at Akira's face. "No. ... You saw?"

"I could see it. You were staaaanding in front of the post box, so when I was looking and wondering what you were doing..." Akira said giving a forced sigh. "I didn't know Kaori had this little common sense."

"Isn't it fine? It's still hot," Kaori struggled to make an excuse as she turned back. "And a midsummer greeting is only good until Obon but there's no cut off for a late summer greeting card."

"I think I'm gonna cry, having an older sister who doesn't even know something as basic as this."

Kaori turned back towards her little brother Akira who was following her.

"What's that?"

"Even late summer greeting cards have a seasonal cut off. September's about over, you're really pushing it. And a midsummer greeting's not until Bon. It's the first day of Autumn. Man, it's just embarrassing."

Kaori blinked. "You're kidding aren't you?"

"I'm not kidding. It's until the first day of Autumn."

"...When's the first day of Autumn?"

"I don't know. But it's towards the beginning of August. It's before Bon, I know."

"But," Kaori murmured. "Megumi said so. That it's until Obon...."

Akira looked at her blankly. "Megumiii?"

"Right. I don't know when, but Megumi said so. So I always thought that was..."

Akira sighed. "Megumi didn't know what she was talking about, but she was

brimming with confidence about that, wasn't she?"

Is that how it was, Kaori thought. If it was past the first of Autmn then a late summer greeting card was fine. If Megumi knew that, she could have probably sent it out herself.

Thinking that, Kaori's feet stopped. She turned back around towards the post box. The post that right now held an out og season post card. The four cornered red post box. Right around the corner from that was Megumi's house.

Megumi couldn't send it. Even though the post box was that close. As for why, that was because Megumi thought that a late summer greeting was after Bon. And yet over Obon she had gotten sick and been bedridden.

(But, if she was that sick that she couldn't even walk that little bit of a distance....)

"Megumi... When did she write that..."

Hearing her talk to herself, Akira tilted his head. "What? Megumi wrote that?"

Oh no, she thought too late. Kaori gave an unwilling nod. "It's a secret. ...Megumi left it behind. So, even if it's out of season, I thought I'd send it for her."

"Heh."

"Megumi thought that a late summer greeting was from the thirteenth I think. But, on the thirteenth she was sick. No, she was already bad by the eleventh. Since she collapsed in the mountains."

"Then, she must've written it before that."

"If it was before that, it would be a midsummer greeting wouldn't it? That's what Megumi thought!"

"That right? Then, she pushed herself to write it even when she was sick."

"That's... what it would have to be, wouldn't it?" Megumi wrote the post card after getting sick. She could only think as much. But something was pulling at her. Something was weird.

Kaori stopped, her head tilting, when she realized that she had come up beside the Ohtsuka Sawmill. Looking at the piled heaps of lumber, she suddenly thought.

"Megumi... when did she meet the Kirishiki's wife?"

"Haa?"

"I saw the wife. On the thirteenth."

"You said something like that, yeah."

"Mm. It was when I was going to pay Megumi a get well visit. I told Megumi too. That she was pretty. And then Megumi said that she knew."

"Knew? Then, Megumi met her before too."

"Right? But, when I saw her at the bottom of the hill on the tenth, she didn't seem like she had. I mean, Megumi didn't know what kind of people were in the family. When I said there wer rumors there was a wife and a daughter, she looked like it was the first she'd heard of it."

Akira tilted his head. "Uhhh, then? It'd have to be on the eleventh, huh? Ain't that the day Megumi went missing?"

"Right. We parted at the bottom of the hill. Megumi went up the hill."

"And then, like, she was found in the middle of the night, wasn't she? She was sick and collapsed in the mountains. Since then she'd been bedridden."

"That's right! If she had been out walking around on the twelfth or the thirteenth, Megumi would have sent the post card. If she'd sent it on the twelfth, it'd arrive on the thirteenth or later."

"In other words, she didn't leave the house on the twelfth or the thirteenth is what it comes down to then, huh? Then she couldn't have met the Kanemasa's wife, it had to be the eleventh. That's the only thing I can think of. She went up the hill and met the wife there."

"But," Kaori murmured. "It became such a big deal? They combed the mountains, and the young man from Kanemasa came out to help. Nobody knew where Megumi had gone, I was the last one to see her, at the bottom of the hill.

If the Kanemasa people had seen her, wouldn't they say so?"

Akira tilted his head. "Even though they saw her, they didn't say anything...."

"But, why?"

---Maybe something happened.

Kaori's mother had said this.

----A girl out until that hour! When she came back, she was acting strange, didn't they say? Something happened, I'm sure of it. You be careful, too, Kaori. There are all kinds of weirdos out in the summer.

(Something really might have happened...)

Kaori lifted her face and looked towards the western mountain. From where Kaori was standing now, she could only see a mountain of firs.

(At the top of that hill, something)

Something happened to make Megumi sick. Something that would be a problem to them if others knew about it.

"Hey.... Kaori," Akira said with an unusually serious voice. "Lately, don't you think there are a whole lot of dead people?"

Kaori tilted her head. "I do, but."

"And that's been since Kanemasa moved in hasn't it?"

She stared blankly. Was that right? She wasn't sure but she was sure there were some before.

"But still, Megumi suddenly got sick and died, and right before she got sick, like, she climbed Kanemasa, didn't she? Probably while there she met the wife."

"Y, yeah."

"And you, you met her on the thirteenth, the Kirishiki's wife. That was when she was with Yasuyuki Nii-chan, didn't you say?"

Kaori gasped in a breath.

That was right. She was with the Ohtsuka Sawmill's Yasuyuki. And----.

"Yasuyuki Nii-chan is dead too, isn't he."

Kaori couldn't move. Yes, it was right around here. In the lumberyard, Yasuyuki was explaining something or other to Chizuru. Suddenly Yasuyuki's health failed and he died.

"Megumi must have met the wife. But, nobody at Kanemasa said anything about---"

"Hey... Let's stop."

"Kaori?"

"I'm getting scared. Let's stop talking about that."

Akira called after her, but she shook her head. She ran from that place and hurried towards the house.

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"Huh, it's another move." Natsuno stopped.

"Hn?" Said Tohru who came out to buy his usual cigarettes, stopping. "Ah, really."

Just coming out of the Mutous house was a harvested field and across that field could be seen a truck easing in around a row of houses. Natsuno checked his wrist watch immediately.

In coming home from school, he came back together off of the bus with Tamotsu. Since then he'd stayed close with Tamotsu going back to the Mutou's house, being fed dinner by them before going back to his own house. Just when he was thinking of leaving, Tohru's father had returned. It seemed lately the hospital was busy, with Mutou returning so late. Not just late, it seemed he was bringing work home too. He'd even caught sight of their mother Shizuko helping with it. He worked this late, he thought looking at his wrist watch and it was already ten o'clock. Just as he thought, the hand on his watch was passing eleven. No matter how you thought about it it was a late hour to be moving.

"Takasago movers again." Natsuno said to himself, making Tohru tilt his head.

"Again?"

"Just last time there was a move at a weird hour wasn't there? That was Takasago movers too."

"Did something like that happen?"

"Are you already going senile, you old fart?" Sighing deliberately to be heard, Tohru's fist came flying out at him. Laughing at that, he dodged, separating from Tohru. While heading on the night road to his house, he'd thought that something was off.

The summer of continuing deaths. When that about ended, now it was

movings being sighted. No, maybe nothing had ended. Mutou's returning home so late the sun had set was proof of that. Anyway, it's busy, Mutou grumbled. Bust meant that there were just that many patients, that the number of people who were sick was increasing. Actually, he'd also seen a lot of funerals. He didn't know who all they were for but it was indeed proof people were dying.

This was what happened when the village was exposed to depopulation. A lot of moves. ---But, he couldn't make sense of the fact that those moves were all separately at night. And then there was the fact that they were all with the same moving company, what was that?

He returned home feeling unsatisfied. As he came in to the entryway and took off his shoes, his mother poked her face in bitterly, looking as if she were fresh from the bath.

"Welcome back. The Mutous' again?"

"Yeah."

"Again and again, being treated to dinner over there. They're in the neighborhood so can't you at least come back for dinner?"

Yeah, he gave as a half hearted answer.

"Or at least if you came home once then went back out? Honestly, which family do you live with!"

Which family nothing, Natsuno murmured in his heart. This wasn't a "family." They were the ones who refused to take on the form of a married couple, refusing to be a family in the first place, weren't they, he thought. This was nothing more than a place where two adults, a man and a woman, gathered together with a child. He didn't plan to criticize his parents way of life but he was disconcerted by the way they declined the obvious while at the same time being indifferent to the way they themselves demanded the obvious.

Without looking at his mother giving idle complaints, once he tried to return to his room she called out to stop him.

"Hey, a post card came for you." His mother pointed above the shoe rack.

"For me?" Natsuno took the post card in hand. "---What is this?"

It was a late summer greeting. Passing his eyes over the writing, once he knew it was Megumi, his brows furrowed.

"Sending a late summer greeting now, that's weird, isn't it? Who is she, this Shimizu-san girl."

"Don't read other people's postcards."

"Oh my, but since it's a post card it can't be helped can it?"

He stared at his mother coolly then lowered his eyes to the postcard.

---Shimizu Megumi.

"Isn't it from Shimizu-san's daughter? That."

"....Probably."

"That's not good. Why is a post card coming now? It's creepy."

"Probably somebody's prank," he said heading directly to his room. He turned on the light in his room and looked again at the postcard.

Without a doubt, this is that "Shimizu Megumi," he thought. But, Megumi died in the middle of August. There was no reason for the dead to send him a post card, and no matter how he thought about it, it was too late for a late summer greeting card. Megumi might have written it before she died. And some kind of accident happened that least it it being delivered now, then?

Somehow it still felt like something was going unaccounted for but he didn't think he needed to force himself to feel creeped out. Natsuno moved to throw it into the trash----for some reason, though, he stopped.

He didn't plan to hold onto it and treasure it dearly. But, there was no reason he had to throw it away or whatever today, he thought.

Tohru bent down to the vending machine and took out his pack of cigarettes. Pocketing the change, he turned around. While walking along the night road, something felt off, he thought.

There were a lot of funerals, a lot of moves. ---Definitely a lot, he thought. There had never been this many before. He didn't want to jump to the

conclusion that something that had never happened before happening was weird but he couldn't come to a satisfactory conclusion. Lately, something was strange in the village, he couldn't help but feeling. Like something was out of tune, like the wheels were turning without getting anywhere, like things had deviated terribly from where they should have been.

Unthinkingly tossing his cigarette pack in the air, he caught it as it came back down. It then jumped from the palm of his hand onto the road surface, rebounding and tumbling. It tumbled before a young man. The man picked it up.

"Ah, sorry."

"No. Here."

He didn't recognize the face of the man handing it over. He was probably a few years older than Tohru. It wasn't as if he knew all of the villagers by any means but he did indeed know those of his own generation. If it wasn't somebody he recognized, he could only think he was someone from Kanemasa.

"By chance are you from Kanemasa?"

That's right, the other smiled. "This's the first time I've met someone the same age as me. I am called Tatsumi. Good to meet you."

"Hello, good to meet you too. I'm Mutou."

"I had thought there wasn't anybody around my age in the village."

"That isn't the case. There aren't many, so the odds of encountering them are low, I'd think, though."

While answering, he thought, this is him. He was probably the rumored "young one from Kanemasa." The one who appeared at Masao's place.

"---Are you out for a walk?"

"I'm not out for a walk persay, more like loitering. It's boring inside the house but there's no place to go. I wonder what the young people in the village do to pass the time every day..." Tatsumi said, Tohru smiling.

"In the village, there's not much to do besides watch TV and sleep. Eating's about it. If you want to do anything more substantial while hanging out, there's nothing to do but go out of the village."

Tatsumi blinked. "Then, there is no choice but to go to Mizobe as expected. By car?"

"Yup."

"But, if you go out by car, you cannot go drinking, can you?"

"Well, that's what it'd be at face value."

Tatsumi sighed. "I think that it is a nice place, but as expected with no place to go, there's too much time on your hands." Saying this, Tatsumi laughed. "That said, if I walk out in the daytime, I get the feeling I've become a rare beast!"

Tohru laughed. "If you don't have someone to hang out with, there's nothing at all, in this village. That said, even if you take the trouble of going all the way out to Mizobe, I don't think there's any place you could pass the time having that much for yourself, but. Especially at night, yeah? If you go out to Mizobe, the night still ends early there too. Well, unlike the city, that's just how it is here."

"That's how it is."

"There's no major place to hang out but, even so if you like, next time, I could show you around."

"Really?"

"If you like, give me a yell on the weekend. I live in Naka-Sotoba. If you ask for the house of Mutou who works in the hospital office, they'll know right away."

"Ah---you work at the Ozaki Clinic."

"My old man does. I'm just a simple office worker, myself. It's a loud and busy house where it's hard to unwind but, if you want, come on by sometime."

Thank you, Tatsumi smiled. He looked at Tohru as if with some implication.

"I'm glad you offered. ---I will definitely visit you. Until then, best regards."

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On the 28th, the end of Higan during which he couldn't tear himself from the constant memorial services, Seishin visited the household commonly known as San'Yasu---the Yasumiris. It was because he couldn't help wondering about the daughter who had suddenly gone missing.

The San'Yasu's place was at the furthest southern point of Naka-Sotoba, in the vicinity of the bridge that spammed the small driver from the western mountain. Surrounded by concrete, it was more appropriate to call it a canal than a river. On the other side of that was Shimo-Sotoba.

Seishin entered the San'Yasu property going straight towards the entryway but while approaching he noticed the sliding storm door shutters were closed. The time was approximately 2:00, it wasn't a time when the members of the household would be asleep, was it? It made him remember the Murasako household in Yamairi. Seishin stood before the glass door of the entryway with some feeling of premonition.

As expected, the glass door wasn't open. Even pressing the door bell there was no asnwer. Just in case he went around to the other side but all of the windows were closed tightly, the storm doors were shut, the home was shut up completely.

If someone were just walking out somewhere, nobody would close up. The only time one would close up the house like this would be if going out to somewhere far away.

Confused, he returned to the front, looking across the road at the house facing this one. There was nothing but country land all around, the San'Yasus had no neighbors. The nearest house was just the Tamos across the way. They were one of two Tamo households in Naka-Sotoba. This one had the same house layout typical of a farming family like the San'Yasus, so he was able to see from the

porch through the storm doors which were all open that there were people inside and to call out to them.

"Excuse me."

A middle aged woman whom he had seen inside, likely watching TV, turned to face Seishin who had gone as far as the front porch and called out to her. It was Tamo Yukiko.

"Well my, it's the Junior Monk." Yukiko said as she stood, coming out to the front porch.

"The heat is beginning to give, isn't it? How may I help you today?"

"Pardon me. This is about the Yasumori's next door, but."

Ah, said Yukiko. "You have business with the San'Yasus? Them, they moved, just the day before yesterday."

Eh, Seishin's voice raised.

"Well, do come on in. We don't have much, but there is at least tea." Yukiko encouraged enthusiastically, so Seishin gratefully accepted. The television lit up the living room, children's toys spread through the area, though there were no signs of children. As Yukiko returned from preparing the tea she hurriedly gathered them up as she said her grandchild was at the peak age of mischief. "He's finally old enough to walk, we can't take our eyes off of him. He's spreading his toys all over, crying out in a loud voice all day long, and a lot of trouble. His mother and grandmother have taken him out shopping, so I've just finally gotten a break," Yukiko said with a squinting smile.

"Is his grandmother doing well?"

"Well, thank you for asking. She's even healthier than I am! Grandfather died early, she she intends to live all that much longer, so she says, but it seems like she's really going to do it."

"That is most wonderful to hear," said Seishin with a smile, continuing with by the way. "About the Yasumori's."

Ah, Yukiko said looking towards the front of the house opening a bad of sweets. "They moved. The day before yesterday, or rather, that night."

"They were moving about to move in the middle of the night?"

Yes, Yukiko nodded. "Did they not go by the Junior Monk's place to give word. No, they didn't come to say their goodbyes here either. Anyway, we heard the car, and as it was time for going to bed, we looked wondering what it could have been to see a moving truck across the road."

"Was it... Takasago Movers?"

With a surprised beat, Yukuko nodded, Aa. "Come to think of it, there was a pine symbol on it. Was it such an ostentatiously named moving company? You're well informed."

Well, Seishin dismissed, dodging the matter.

With that moving truck in place, looking to be carrying out their luggage like, I was surprised and went over. When I did, they'd said they had moved. ---It was bizarre." Yukiko lowered her voice and hunched forward. "Junior Monk, did yo know that the wife over there had gone missing?"

"I have heard a rumor about as much, but."

"She went missing. At the end of August, it was. Was it perhaps that evening when Meiko-san from next door came to ask if I'd seen her, and when I asked what was happening, she hadn't been there since that morning. When they awoke she was gone, and while they thought she had gone out, she still hadn't come back. I suggested they hurry and tell the resident officer. Lately, we just can't know what's going on in the village, after all."

You know what I mean don't you, was all Yukuko said exchanging looks with him. Seishin gave a vague nod.

"That's when she said that she would surely return once it turned to night, though. In the end, she didn't come back the next day. When I asked Meiko-san the story, she said that Hinako-san's travel case was gone, along with some of her clothes. She ran out, Meiko-san said, and my was she mad. ---But, this might not be appropriate to say, but, I had a feeling it would come to that some day. Their relationship with the wife of the household was poor, after all."

Yes, Seishin offered as sheer back channeling.

"Back before, you know? When Hinata-chan and Kouji-kun were getting together, there was quite the fuss. Meiko-san did not take to Hinata-chan. But she was a good girl, very social---of should I say, she was a modern, energetic girl who went all out! And it was decided that Kou-chan was going to be married to her. When talk of the marriage came about, they had already decided on the ceremony. The two of them were going to go off somewhere abroad by themselves to have the ceremony. That had Meiko-san and Seiichirou-san mad, didn't it! How terrible doing it abroad, and to decide on something like that all on their own, they said. To start with they hadn't even heard that the two were going to be married, there's no way they could allow it, they said. Well, if it had been my own son, I'd have had a row, too, you know. I absolutely won't allow you to marry her, she's said, terribly threatening but the truth was by that time, Hinata-chan already had a bun in the oven, didn't she? It wasn't a matter of allowing or not allowing it."

"She was with child?"

"In the end, she miscarried, though. But since she was having a child, it couldn't be helped, Hinata-chan's parents couldn't keep quiet. Somewhere in there, everyone was making a stand, but somehow it calmed itself out and the ceremony was held in Mizobe. And once that was done, next time there was the dispute with Hinata-chan's own parents. I mean, the San'Yasu's oldest son left the home, didn't he? He was well put together ever since high school, and in the end he went to a good college in the city, and got hired a bit metropolitan bank. Never the less, Hinata-chan's parents said that since he would become like a second son to them they'd allow the marriage. But that doesn't mean living with them, that's another matter. Kou-chan tried to be slick like that, didn't he? Both families fought but all the while Hinata-chan's stomach was getting bigger, and Kou-chan, being Kou-chan, was as stuck on Meiko-san as ever. Ever since he was little, if his mother wasn't in sight that child would go around looking for her while crying, wouldn't he! In the end, while they said they weren't happy about it, they said fine to it, and in the end it was Hinata-chan's parents who had to fold, though."

Ha, Seishin nodded.

"Through this and that they got together but with it being like that before the

marriage, there was no way it could have gone well. Anyway, the fighting had never died out. Meiko-san and Seiichirou-san were both cold to Hinata-chan, and at those sorts of times Kou-chan would back his mother, and with losing a child on top of that, and Meiko-san and her husband blamed Hinata-chan for that, well, for Hinata-chan and Hinata-chan's parents, that was just a terrible story. She couldn't bear being blamed after she'd lost a child, even though it was a dangerous situation for the mother herself! When it came to talking about whether she'd return to her home family or not, well, even we advised Meiko-san on what to do. You can't have that happen, we said. And so this time it was Meiko-san and their turn to bow their heads and apologize, somehow bringing peace about, but as expected the fights didn't die out with that, did they?"

"Ah.... Is that right."

"In things like this, it's a husband's job to stand in the middle and somehow make things work out, but after all Kou-chan is a Mother-con or has an Oedipus complex is it called? He always had his own parent's back. So it looks like the fights with Hinata-chan never tapered out. Hinata-chan wasn't a bad girl but she wasn't the type who could stay quiet if there was something to be said. ---Well, I'd thought when I'f heard that Hinata-chan was gone that she'd returned to her home family at last too, but. Go to check with them, I'd said to even Kou-chan but Kou-chan and Meiko-san and her husband all said that if she wants to leave let her do what she wants. But, when these things happen, that isn't what you do, is it? If you're breaking up, break up properly, we tried to advice them. And so when they finally contacted her home family, the home family said she hadn't returned. It was her parents whose color went pale!"

Seishin blinked. "The parents from the other family were not aware of it?"

"That's right, they weren't! Her parents turned it around, asking what they were thinking not making contact until now, what would it come to if something happened to their daughter, with a fighting, threatening attitude. In the end, it was the other family who filed the missing person's report. Mieko-san and her group being them said they were sure it was probably a man, that she ran away with him without a doubt, and such outrageous things. But no, our own wife here talked with Hinata-chan a good amount yes? So that's why I can say this, but Hinata-chan was a more solid kid than you'd think, in spite of her all-out

looks. She wasn't that kind of girl but when you first see her, her hair is red, and she dresses flashy so it's an easy mistake to make, that she was just playing around. That's, she did go out to Mizobe often, walking around until late at night it seems but with her husband's family being like that, she was returning to her home family to complain, meeting with girl friends to be comforted and the like. Mieko-san and them thought that she was playing out at night a lot, they were so sure that there was a man, though, yes?"

"...Is that so. "

As Seishin wondered what he did to deserve getting stuck listening to these endless family circumstances, Yukiko said: "And despite everything being like that, they said Hinata-chan called them."

"----Eh?"

"Like I said," Yukiko said as if convincing him to listen. "A call came from Hinata-chan, and they said they were going to live with her, you know. But, isn't that a bizarre story? If Hinata-chan came back, I'd understand that, don't you know. But living together, there's no way that could mean the San'Yasus moving, could it? Kou-chan had a job and all. Do you think there's any chance that Kou-chan would quit that job, that they'd abandon the mountains and their fields, to move into their wife's place?"

Seishin tilted his head.

It was impossible. Even taking the story with a grain of salt, she left due to so much antagonism---Even setting aside that it had been the same thing with Sakai-Matsu's son, he couldn't think that if the wife had called, the family wouldn't throw away their plots of land to go.

"That can't be, I said to them. Something like that, you can't expect me to believe it, I said. But you know? Mieko-san said that either way that's how it is, persistently. She was like... her eyes were glazed over. Like she was possessed, would you call it? She wouldn't say where she was going, what they were going to do. In the end, without saying where she was moving to, they moved away. And that's leaving behind their furniture and family goods. I saw the truck's loading tray after all. They really took the bare minimums. Packing up enough to

barely call moving, they left their house in the night. I just find it so creepy I can't stand it!"

That was abnormal, Seishin thought. That move was strange no matter how he thought about it. He could only think that Mieko saying it was in order to live together with Hinako was a lie. Yet all the same, why would she have to tell such a life and leave the village? They had a house and land. They had jobs and lives. To cast all of that off into the wind, never mind that they quietly fled away, to go so far as to use such a transparent lie, why could the family absolutely have to pull out of the village so badly?

Yukiko breathed a sigh.

"And even still, my son's been saying some scary things, it feels so creepy."

"Scary things?"

Yes, Yukiko lowered her voice. "You don't think Hinata-chan's buried in the yard behind the house, do you, like."

It can't be, Seishin started to say when he realized he couldn't necessarily deny that. ---No, that wasn't it. It wasn't a matter of the probability not being the possibility. It was that there was a shadow from the undeniably ominous thoughts looming after the San'Yasu's move.

On the road home, Seishin couldn't help but become caught up in his thoughts. The problem was supposed to be a plague. Since summer, a continuing string of inexplicable deaths. That was supposed to be what Seishin was investigating. Certainly since summer the number of dead had not been normal. But all the same, thinking of Sakai-Matsu and San'Yasu, what was truly strange was not a matter of who was dead, he thought.

Something was advancing on the village. Wasn't the sickness but one part of that, was the impression he had. But, what was advancing? Incomplete moves and dead people, what significance was there that he was trying to say was between them----.

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That day, Toshio received the phone call informing him of Gyouda Etsuko's death in the evening. When Toshio had rushed there, Etsuko was without a doubt dead, and a few hours had passed since she'd died. It seemed she had died while her husband Bungo was in the mountaints. Her dead face was calm and her clothes were undisturbed. Lethargic and her breath just stopped. Toshio mechanically wrote acute renal failure on the death certificate.

When handing over the death certificate, Toshio requested for Gyouda to allow him to take a blood sample from Etsuko but, as expected, Gyouda refused. Aside from not being able to do a blood test, he could only theorize but Etsuko had held out relatively well for her age. She was quick to visit the hospital, and with treatment for a bit its worsening had been abated. But---Toshio thought as he returned to the hospital where patients were working him to death. The problem was that the bunch from the village were hurrying into the hospital when there was no particular condition, while the ones who were really ill were avoiding the hospital. Unable to get past their own physical condition, they didn't want to go out, and while avoiding that they became unable to move about.

What to do, he could probably have the patients hospitalized right away; while worrying thusly, examination hours ended. Seishin came when he was drawing back to his own room glaring at medical charts.

"---How is it?" Seishin opened, speaking first.

Toshio answered carelessly that it was hopeless. "As expected, the premonitory symptom's anemia. There's a fever too, but not too high. From there in about three days it dramatically worsens. Deterioration of multiple organs, furthermore accompanied by light edema and mild jaundice, or possibly blisters and inflammation from a diminished immune mechanism. Since antibiotics don't work, it isn't bacteriogenous."

"Bacteriogenous?"

"Vancomycin doesn't have any effect. I dare say it's probably not caused by a bacteria. At any rate, at the level where it's manifesting amnesia, with a full blood transfusion, it feels like there's some effect that keeps them alive longer. Characteristics outside of the anemia include blisters. In all cases festering traces of insect bites were found presenting near blood vessels. I think that confirms that there's an intermediary carrier but I can't concretely specify what it is. That's all the commonalities between the patients. Their physical health and characteristics, lifestyles and habits, circumstances, they're all unrelated. I can't think of it as contaminated water, soil, or food. It's not poison, it's an infectious disease. That much I can say for the time being is reality. ---And, on your end?"

Seishin opened the notebook. He passed over a copy folded within it to Toshio.

"A common point was, as usual, not found. As you can see. Also, ----I don't know whether this has any connection or not but...." Seishin hesitate to speak. Toshio, resting his chin in his hands, urged him to go on.

"Gigorou-san from Yamairi left and returned to the village when he was sick."

"You said that before too, last time," Toshio started to say, Seishin talking past him.

"Ohta Kenji, Hirosawa Takatoshi, Saeki Akira, Takashima Yasuo, Shimizu Gardening's Ryuuji-san, and Ohkawa's Shigeru-san, these six commuted to work outside of the village. And---Just before their death, suddenly, they retired from office."

Toshio titled his head. "What's that?"

"I'm saying, before they died they resigned without a word to their families. And furthermore, very, tremendously suddenly, quitting without a reason. In the case of Hirosawa's Takatoshi-san, he made as if he were going out to work and he was passing his time in the Pachinko parlor in Mizobe, where he collapsed."

"Funny story, isn't it..."

"Of the people who have died, there were six people who had commuted. Each of those resigned before they died. ....What do you think this is?"

Like I know? Toshio answered. "Just, if nothing else it's not connected to the disease. Those guys didn't have symptoms."

He tried to give a smile but Toshio himself wasn't satisfied with that dismissal. It might have been a coincidence but even so six people were six people, and all of them.

"Also, I know that this isn't related either but.... There are fewer people.. Have you noticed?"

"I *know*

there're fewer."

"That's not what I mean. Not just from dying. There are a lot of move-outs. There are also many who it's unknown if they moved or died. They're also suddenly leaving the village. They're leaving the village as if running away into the night, without a word to their neighbors." Seishin said, presenting the copy of the memo. In withered characters were written 22 names, not in Seishin's hand writing, and at the end of that, this time in Seishin's writing, "Maruyasu (San'Yasu) * Naka-Sotoba" was added.

"The circumstances of the moves are strange, too." Saying this, Seishin talked about the examples of the Sakai-Matsu and San'Yasus. Toshio scowled. Indeed, these circumstances were bizarre. But, unless they realized the illness and fled, moves were unrelated.

"I received the certificates of residence from Ishida-san, too. By the way, from August until now, there haven't been any moving notices turned in to him."

"Not a one?"

"Not a one. Even Takami-san's family did not turn one in."

"That's a strange story too, another one."

Toshio gazed at the note but it didn't invite much of his interest. It obviously had no connection to the disease. No matter how many people there may have been moving out, that wasn't within Toshio's sphere of action."

"I've been hearing that Yuzuki-san from the library had quit or that the

principal of the grade school had wanted to quit too. ....Do you not think that something is odd?"

"That" Toshio threw down the note. "is a weird story if you want me to call it weird but,

but

, that and this case aren't related."

Toshio looked serious as he nodded.

"I don't think it is. But it doesn't make sense! It feels like something is happening in the village. It feels like, somehow, the illness is a part of that something."

"It's your imagination," Toshio declared. Something like a faint irritation seized him.

"I've thought that may be the case. But, Sadaichi-san had noted this but look at that moving list. The people who came and went from Yamairi are cleanly, clearly gone now. The three living in Yamairi died, and the people who would have come and gone to Yamairi from any place else have done. With the people related to Yamairi gone, it really is settled. Doesn't Yamairi seem like a place of interest?"

Toshio breathed a sigh. "You can't just tie every little thing together."

"But."

"You're right that that was Yamairi and this is Yamairi too. You're right that there are a lot of people moving out too, and I'll even acknowledge that the circumstances are weird. ---But, what connection are you saying this has to the illness?"

"That's..."

Seishin casted his eyes down.

"It must've been a royal pain to investigate all this this far. But, this has nothing to do with us. What we have to think about right now is that disease on our hands. It's building momentum, don't you get it?!"

"That's..."

"You've completely lost sight of the point of the investigation. We have to prove that the string of deaths is being caused by an epidemic. We have to confirm what kind of disease it is, to find a way to treat it. And yet here we are with its premonitory symptoms being hard to read, with it getting to the point where nothing can be done but the time the people around them notice it!" Toshio spit out. While saying it, he knew his own words were setting off his irritation. "We need medical cases. And yet the villagers aren't coming in to the doctor until it's gotten worse! They're counting on a lay person's judgement and folk remedies! As circumstances get worse and worse by the time they're brought in, and if there's no way to save them, I can't even track how it progresses! ---There's no doubt it's an epidemic. There's probably a carrier animal. That's all that we know. We can't even overlap the disease's consistencies. It's true I'm not an epidemiologst. Nor am I a researcher. I'm just an ordinary private practive doctor. There're limits to what I know, I won't deny that. But, I've still put my best into this. But, even if I research and research, I just keep thinking more and more that these symptoms shouldn't be happening. There's nothing wrong with blood formation or hematosis. There's nothing wrong with their bone marrow. We're not finding any internal bleeding. All that leaves is hemolysis but the hemolysis reaction's not happening. Anemia that shouldn't happen is happening. And it's getting violently worse. There're way, way too few medical cases. So it's nothing but a bunch where the mechanism that leads to their deaths don't even match up!"

Toshio smacked the mountain of clinical records.

"The essential patients don't come in until the sickness has gotten to the last stage. And yet the number of patients with pointless complaints of illness are increasing. How many patients do you think come in in one day lately?! Even the staff are mentally strained! They're tired!"

With his eyes still cast down, Seishin remained quiet.

"You think I give a damn about the bunch who leave here because they want to? You've wasted our time! On top of that, you even asked Sadaichi-san, you said?! What do you think Sadaichi-san's going to make of you sniffing around here and there?! Not just that, the bunch in this village aren't idiots! They're

starting to notice something's up! If on top of that it gets around that the Junior Monk from the temple's asking around for information, isn't that going to fuel their uneasiness even more!"

The one who was depressed was taking on an explosive form. Seishin tried to say something but in the end he held his tongue. The sympathy he'd felt towards Toshio was visible there on his face. Seishin probably thought that Toshio was impatient and tired, making him irritable. And he'd be right, but right then that compassion laden gaze was rubbing on his nerves the wrong way.

"If you've got the time to spare for all that, then take note of the faces of the people who come to the temple. Looking to see if people are sick, straining your ears to hear if people are talking like someone in their family has a cold would be who knows how many times more useful!"

Seishin didn't object. I understand, was all he said shortly, his head bowed faintly at something.

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As he lit the lamp, Seishin confirmed anew that he had come to the sanctuary because he was depressed.

It was already past midnight into the hours labelled AM. Early in the morning the temple was asleep, so be it in the office or his own room, there was no need to think that someone would poke their heads in. If he simply wanted to be alone, he could have been by himself anywhere he liked at the temple. And yet taking the trouble to walk all the way out to here, he must have been looking for some comfort in this desolated church, he thought.

He doubted he would come out here so incessantly if it were just an abandoned house. There was probably some meaning to this being a sacred place. At the same time if this were a genuine church, he was uncerain whether he'd have walked here or not after all. Seishin looked up at the altar and realized that if this were touted as an earnest object of worship, he wouldn't likely be so attached to this place. While it was clearly a sanctuary, there was no God enshrined at the altar. He might have realized as much.

Yes---that much was probably more than certain. Right now, he had just become aware of that. The proof of that was that ever since he'd lit the lamp. Seishin had been unconsciously listening closely.

At some point, insects voices petered out. All that filled the church was the sound of the wind. Within that the faint creek of a door hinge echoed.

"Good evening," Seishin lightly waved to the little girl who came in through the lurching door. "It's gotten cool, hasn't it?"

"Yes," Sunako nodded. "The scent of the night has completely changed. Fall is coming, isn't it?"

"It seems like it has, doesn't it?"

"Have you made some progress?"

Seishin shook his head at Sunako who sat on a nearby bench.

"I see... It sounds troublesome. Is that why Muroi-san is feeling down?"

"I wonder about that."

"You don't know?"

Mm, Seishin nodded honestly. "If I don't do something somehow, is what it is, I think. But it's true that I'm frustrated with myself for not being able to do anything. While I'm doing this, many people are dying. Yet there isn't anything at all I can do."

"It's futile?"

"Mm, it is. --But, more than me, it's Toshio. Toshio is a doctor, he has carries a duty towards his patients. But he cannot save them. His patients keep dying. I know that he's impatient, that he feels helpless. He's upset that he can't do anything and is angry. He's losing his temper."

"How piteous."

"Mm, it is piteous."

Seisuin sighed. --Yes, he had intended to fully understand Toshio's sentiments. He sympathized with the position Toshio was put into. Because he was his friend, he wanted to help him. And yet he couldn't do anything.

"As for me, though, I think about how much I want to help Toshio. But the truth is I can't do anything. Toshio is irritated with me for that."

"Because Muroi-san is not useful? Isn't that what they would call taking it out on you?"

"Mm, that's right. It isn't that I'm not useful that's irritating him, he's upset with himself I think. And by nature, Toshio isn't someone who will forgive himself for acting like that. So seeing it, it's painful."

Sunako tilted her head.

Seishin said nothing more, only smiling.

Seishin wanted to help Toshio. Because he understood Toshio's temperament, he believed he understood how frustrated he was with himself right now. So,

Seishin intended to serve him with his utmost in his own way but it seemed Toshio didn't accept that. He'd wasted his time, he accused.

Being condemned in itself wasn't really something that especially depressed him. What was sad was that Seishin couldn't get it through to Toshio that he understood Toshio's irritation. He understood Toshio's impatience, so he wanted to abate that any little bit that he could, he was acting to that end, and that Toshio did not know that was sad. --No, Toshio probably knew that. But he was upset with himself, and had to lash out at Seishin. He wasn't blaming Seishin, he was blaming himself. He knew even that much, so he couldn't be unjustly upset with him, so when he looked back on it afterwards, he would be plagued by even more self loathing, and he had pity for Toshio when that time came.

"I cannot put it well into words, but I more or less understand Muroi-san's feelings."

"Do you?"

Sunako nodded. "Your feelings aren't being conveyed. No, the Junior Doctor of the Ozakis is impatient with the situation and closing off his feelings. So while Muroi-san tries to communicate, he cannot receive what is being conveyed. Muroi-san is lonely because of that, yes? More than for not being able to convey your own feelings, it's painful when the other will not open their heart to receive what you're trying to convey. Humans are isolated like that. You can't stand it---am I wrong?"

Seishin forced a smile. "You're amazing."

"Oh my, well, I am Muroi-san's fan," Sunako laughed. "It isn't as if I need to guess when it comes to Muroi-san's feelings. It's just that I had thought as much before when reading Muroi-san's books."

"Heh?"

"Humans are isolated, aren't they? They cannot understand each other meaningfully. Even if they think that they understand, even if they understand the and confirm matters speaking the same language, they don't know if they really understand each other. They make contact with others wanting to be understood and sympathized with but all of that is nothing but an illusion. And

that is a very lonely thing. ...When reading Muroi-san's books, I have thought that."

"Hmm?"

"Surely the author is lonely too, it felt like. I just remembered that."

Is that right, Seishin forced a smile.

"Say, may I ask a question? The story Muroi-san is writing now, what kind of story is it?"

"....The story of a man wandering a wasteland."

Sunako tilted her head.

"An older brother who killed his little brother is exiled from the town and wanders the wasteland. His dead little brother follows after him. ---A story like that."

"His dead little brother became a ghost?"

"It's a little different. A Shiki."

"Shiki?"

"A corpse demon. The risen. The dead body rises up, coming up from the grave. There's an oni like that in the village."

"....Aa," Suanko said becoming a bit lost in thought. "It's different from a ghost, isn't it? If they've risen up, they have a proper body. But it's the body of a corpse. It isn't as if they've been revived."

"Mm, right."

"But it isn't a simple corpse like a zombie, is it? They have a proper consciousness, an existence equal to humans. But they aren't alive. They're a completely different existence." Saying that, Sunako tried feeling the word Shiki in her mouth. It seemed she had taking quite the liking to that word. She gave a satisfied laugh. "I think it is good! So very good! --The little brother became a Shiki and follows his brother, yes? That's from Genesis, isn't it? Cain and Abel."

"Mm... Well, yes."

Sunako nodded several times. "How interesting. Even though Muroi-san is a monk, many of your stories have a non-Buddhist religious atmosphere. This time it's the Bible? Before that it was Greek Mythology, and before that, a Native American one."

"Aa, now that you mention it, it's true."

"But, this time it is Cain again, isn't it?"

Seishin blinked. "Again?"

"Right. A story of heresy. Cain was a heretic, wasn't he? How shall I put it---one who is inexplicably distinct."

"Cain is a very significant figure in the bible."

"I know that. I'm not talking about the Bible, I'm talking about Muroi-san's literary style. Isn't that true of Cain? I don't think that Cain understood why he was rejected by God. He was denied as a heretic and felt alienated, I think. So he was jealous and killed Abel, right?"

"That's the common reading, isn't it?"

"It has to be that kind of story. The story of someone abandoned by God."

"I guess it is."

Sunako nodded. Folding both hands behind her back, she looked up at the half-destroyed altar. "....A man who grew horns. Suddenly, a horn grew on him, and he feared himself who had become different from the common man. Because he would be unreasonably discriminated against, he was desperate to hide it. But, the man ended up worshiped as a God, didn't he? And demanded to perform miracles. Even though he didn't have the power to perform miracle, he just had a horn."

Watching Sunako walk about, Seishin gave a bewildered nod.

"The man was relieved he wasn't discriminated against but he didn't have the power to perform miracles. He was afraid that of other people knew that, that it wasn't a sign of being a God, that it was nothing more than proof he was a heretic. But nobody could blame him for the fact that no miracle happened. --- The man was a heretic after all. He was called a god and excluded because he

was consecrated. The horn was the mark of a heretic. Like the mark put on Cain. Because of it he was unreasonably denied and excluded from society. There was no objective reason to ostracize him. But he couldn't run away from that. It's the same as Cain, isn't it?"

Seishin nodded. "It seems like it is."

"You weren't aware of it, Muroi-san?"

"Mm. I realized it just now. It's certainly so."

It was the same pattern based on a heretic.

"It's interesting isn't it. But I like that about Muroi-san's works. The pain of being abandoned by God, like? Minotaur himself knew that he was not a god, and was afraid he would be rejected, so he made a miracle happen himself, didn't he? By killing a sinner a curse was born. The villagers feared and honored him, building up a wall. In other words, to keep him at a distance, right? And for each who were killed another wall was built, until a grand labyrinth was built around him. He was hidden deep in the labyrinth. And to appease his anger, they presented sacrifices. What he wanted was to be allowed to enter into society as a god but society kept refusing him---" Sunako said, her feet stopping. She turned to look at Seishin. "But, how mysterious. Why is it?"

"Why is it?"

"All of Muroi-san's stories seem like that, do they not? But, Muroi-san doesn't look as if he's been abandoned by God. Aren't you a very important person in the village? It looks like the people of the village love the Junior Monk of the temple. Everyone praises you, Tatsumi was saying. Respected and adored, you are an important person of the village, perfectly involved."

"It's true that I am involved."

"Isn't it? And it looks as if Muroi-san loves the village too. It's thought of as very important to you. It was so in the essay, too. Even now you are whittling into your spare time by running about looking for a counter measure to the disease, aren't you?"

"That's true. ... Yes, I do indeed love the village. I think it's important."

"But, your works are like that," Sunako said with an impish laugh turning her back. "And, you have scars."

Seishin realized he was subconsciously grasping his watch.

"....Why?" Sunako turned to look over her shoulder at Seishin who shook his head.

"I don't know."

Actually, Seishin loved the village. Seishin wasn't estranged. He was indeed involved as a center of faith, and as the villagers were not frugal in their love and respect towards him, Seishin thought that he wanted to repay that. And so he was making his efforts now.

But, at the same time it was true that Seishin was trying to run away from something. He hadn't realized it himself until Sunako pointed it out but the pain of being "abandoned by God" threaded through Seishin's writings. It was possible that even that was based in some unidentified impulse.

Maybe he felt somewhere in his heart that he was "abandoned by God" and because of that pain once tried to fatally injure himself. That was indeed heavily involved in the figure Cain. Was that why he had yet again subconsciously chosen Cain as his protagonist?

The problem was that Seishin didn't have any awareness of being "abandoned by God." He couldn't understand why he would feel that way. No matter how he thought about it, he didn't think that he was, and didn't think there was a need to think that he was.

"How funny. If Muroi-san is that influenced by it, wouldn't that mean it is something important to Muroi-san? And yet if you're not aware of it, you don't know why, do you?"

"Mm. That's right."

"Your subconscious is leaking out. Authors are mysterious indeed."

"....You said it."

After Seishin parted from Sunako, while walking the mountain path, he thought with each step.

The Minotaur that Seishin wrote was a heretic. He became a heretic when he got the horn but it was possible that he was essentially a heretic from the beginning. The horn was only a manifestation of that. Cain had the sin of killing his little brother---and that reflected Seishin's sin of fatally wounding himself.

(But still, why?)

Seishin was indeed included in the village. As a pillar of faith to be he was an important part. The people around Seishin wished for him to be, and more importantly, Seishin himself wished as much. As Sunako had pointed out, the village was important to Seishin. He accepted that it had its own foolishness, its own imperfections but he came to of it as good even for those.

And again, Seishin did not accept that he himself was a recipient of unreasonable prejudice like Cain. If nothing else, Seishin wasn't, he recognized. There were prejudices but he hadn't thought of them as unreasonable. As for their reverence, love and respect, those were merely earnest gratitude. The parish families and their great and ginger caution towards Seishin were things that Seishin had clearly brought on himself. He knew that there were those in the village who spoke malicious gossip about him but he didn't think of them as unreasonable. Indeed Seishin Indeed, Seishin knew from common sense about the village that fingers pointed at him saying "he's the one." It wasn't an unjust distinction. He had never felt unreasonably denied or estranged. If so then why did it have to be Cain again?

Seishin returned to the office and spread out the Japanese writing paper.

The green fields expanded without end, eventually the greenery being mixed at intervals with white stones and red clays. At the ends of the lands of gently undulating hills which green draped over like a moss were gigantic castle walls. The sturdy ramparts, as if to shroud from the eyes of those who dwelt outside of it, spread out, and then, at that eastern block, a small closed gate.
Until he had been driven out from that gate into the wasteland, he had never seen the wasteland. He only vaguely understood on an intellectual level that the lifeless barren land spread out. He had never held interest in the outer world, and that it would become a scene he was in was something he had never imagined. The world for him was the same as the hlll, for it was the same as if there existed no place at all beyond it.

In an enclosure of the fields was a meager dwelling, and from the field came a modest crop for food. That was when his little brother had still been there with a body that circulated warm blood. His little brother kept sheep in the green fields, and he planted grains and corns near their dwelling, just enough for the two of them to satisfy their daily needs. The neighbors were gentle and kind hearted, the hands they extended ever warm.

Looking back on it, he thinks that he was fulfilled there. If he weren't, why would he yearn for the hill as he did, thinking of it with an almost mad love?

Actually he had loved working. He liked plowing the soft soil around the house, looking at the fascinating and elegant black colors which held such nutrients, and he thought fondly of the smell of the earth. There he scattered the seeds, thinking pleasantly of the small dots of pea-green that would bug there, and being blessed to watch over them as they grew there.

He leaned over as if to speak to the great earth, and when he incidentally rose up, the surroundings were green on one side. Beyond the gentle undulations was the ever green of the forest, and in that direction the towns buildings, only their points shining through. The conspicuously tall tower was awash in splendorous light even in the daytime, confirming that something grand was watching over him each time he looked upon it.

The green field was swarmed with wild growths of flowers, dotted with white down fluffed sheep peacefully feeding on the grass. His little brother at times chased after a sheep that wandered off from the flock scolding it, and at times stood amongst the sheep and, like his brother, gazed beyond the fields and the forests to the head point of the town. Realizing he was being seen resting, he would turn around with a smile and raise a hand.

In the gentle twilight, with the austere evening bells, the safe and protected people gave thanks to the splendor for the day. For gentle firelights, for a contended evening meal, for ample sleep in their warm beds, the golden break of dawn, the songs of the birds, the feel of the breeze, the smell of the rain, the warmth of the sheepfold's stables.

There he was truly fulfilled. And yet none the less, there inside of him like a hard pit, a single sadness was born.

Though the world was this beautifull, it was not for him.

If asked why, it was because he was a heretic.

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Culture/Translation notes:

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The temperature was still a far throw from being called cool but ***the skies seemed higher****...*

In the summer in Japan, there is the high atmospheric pressure

from the Pacific Ocean and in fall there's the one from the

continent. There's less moisture in the one from the continent than the one born of the ocean, so the sky's blue seems deeper and the sky seems clearer. When there isn't as much water vapor and the rising currents are weak, the summer's cumulonimbus clouds give way to more cirrus clouds, which are wispy, feather like, cirrocumulus which are grainy and made from ice crystals, and the thicker, chunky massed altocumulus clouds. These are clouds situated higher

than the typical summer cumulonimbus clouds, further differentiating the seasonal look of the sky.

Class duty

- In Japan, chores for tending to the classroom maintenance and cleaning or helping the teacher with things like delivering attendance sheets or making print-outs are handled on a rotation basis, usually weekly.

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1

September ended and turned to October. Toshio tore off September's page from the calendar.

There was a call from Ishida that morning. Yesterday, Takemura Michiko from Monzen died. Just before noon, Hirosawa Toyoko who lived in Naka-Sotoba had come. Her color was poor and he was taciturn. Toshio had seen that face and realized it was that.

He askind into his patients history thoroughly. That was how he came to be told that her son had died recently, one named Takatoshi.

(Did she catch it from her son---considering that possibility, that's quite an interval...)

Toshio peered into Toyoko's face, telling her that there was something bothering him, so he would run in-depth tests, and that he wanted her to come in for certain tomorrow to hear the results of those tests.

"Haa."

Toyoko, like all the others who had it, gave a vague nod.

"I'm thinking it'd be better to see how this progresses. I'm making you an appointment and will keep that time open, so don't make that a waste. Tomorrow, I'd like to have you be absolutely sure to come in for me."

"But... I think that I am just tired, though? My son died, my energy is just..."

"That's why I'm worried. It'll be at your convenience. If the morning is inconvenient for you, noon, evenings, even at night is fine. If you prefer I'm not even opposed to a house visit, so can you be sure to come for me?"

Toyoko at last nodded.

Toshio nodded, exchanging looks with Kiyomi who was at his side and giving her instructions. Take her vital signs, blood and urine samples, bone marrow

samples and an EKG, a chest and abdomen XP. Kiyomi gave an understanding nod and pressed Toyoko to please come with her.

On the brink of the noon break one more person, an elderly person who lived in Mizuguchi, came in with the expected symptoms. The patients were many, and while the morning patients weren't yet all in order, a request for a house call came in. It went without saying for Toshio, and even the nurses didn't have the time for a break.

When Ritsuko finally was able to eat lunch it was past three in the afternoon. The afternoon examinations would run late, and the time to return home was slowly being pushed back.

"It's become a real hassle, hasn't it." Yasuyo spoke of it while laughing.

It really has, Kiyomi laughed, cleaning up her boxed lunch leftovers and bringing her tea cup to her mouth. It was now the season where teas hotter than barley tea were most satisfying.

"But at least we can take a break like this. The doctor won't have any breaks this evening or tomorrow, it's a hassle."

"Uhm," Ritsuko gazed into her teacup as she spoke. "I'd like for this not to be taken the wrong way but...."

Turning a doubtful gaze to Kiyomi and Yasuyo, they gave her a weak smile.

"I am thinking of asking the Doctor if we could be allowed to come into work on Saturday afternoon and Sundays. I.... think that it's just too much for the doctor to do alone."

Kiyomi and Yasuyo exchanged looks. Ritsuko quickly added on. "I know that Nagata-san and Yasuyo-san have households to run. If you don't have a weekend it will be a hassle, won't it? But, I don't have anybody whom I have to take care of, and my house is nearby. So, if even I'm here at least, I think the doctor might be able to have a small break now and then. So, I was thinking of asking, like..."

Kiyomi gave a light burst of laughter. "Well, that's! We were thinking the same thing. ---Right?"

Kiyomi looked to Yasuyo.

"That we were. Ricchan, you've caught it from us, haven't you!"

"Eh?"

"Because you know? I was saying the same thing to Kiyomi-san. That wouldn't it be better to have the hospital open on Sunday too. The Junior Doctor is surely considering our feelings and not saying anything so, it might not be a bad idea if we all here are the ones to put the idea out there, like."

"....My."

Kiyomi smiled.

"The doctor's that kind of person so unless the circumstances are extremely dire, he won't say something like don't take a day off, come in. But on the other hand, the doctor himself's going to get worn down. He really hasn't had any break in all of this, driven all night until dawn."

"Yes... he is, isn't he."

"So that's why, I think we here need to remember that we're supposed to be like some type of angel of mercy for him too. I was saying that to Yasuyo-san. But, if we did that, what about Ricchan? Yuki-chan and Sato-chan live far away so it's natural that they couldn't come, but it's not like that for Ricchan. But, there's the matter of interfering in a young girl's chances at dating, too."

"Uhm..." They turned to face Yuki and Satoko. "We were talking about that too, actually."

"Well, oh my."

Ritsuko and the others looked to the two young nurses.

"I mean, really, the doctor's in having a hard time, though. Lately, doesn't he look tired and all tense? There are this many nurses, and since the hospital is closed over the weekend, there are people who won't bother the doctor and don't get a doctor's care at all."

"Right, so. We should try talking it over with the doctor, we said. Should we come in on the weekends too? In exchange, please make arrangements for us to use a hotel in the village. Even Towada-san is renting an apartment from the

doctor, so it isn't something he can't do is it? If it comes down to it, there are at least the sick rooms. If we do that, it'll be closer, it'll be easier on us...."

"I'd get to try living on my own too," Yuki said fleetingly sticking out her tongue "My parents know it's busy right now, so I thought they'd let me go. I want to try living on my own but they absolutely won't allow it."

"That's just like Yuki-chan. How calculating you are."

"Hehehe. So like, we were talking about trying to talk to him."

The one whose quiet voice spoke up was Shimoyama. "If the Doctor will accept those conditions, I might try having a talk with him, too."

Ritsuko's mouth popped open. "But, doesn't Shimoyama-san have a wife and child..."

"That's what I mean. I don't want to bring anything strange home. Either way it probably won't last that long anyway. Once the doctor gets the data together, if he can get the administration to take action for us, there won't be any more of a rush for me to do anything. Changing posts to leave my family behind until then wouldn't be so bad."

After the consultation, Ritsuko and the others called in Toshio and stated their conditions. Toshio was for a moment wide-eyed as he looked around at the faces of all who had gathered.

"Oi, oi. Are you all trying to bankrupt me?" Toshio said with his habitually abusive tone. "Even if you're not, what about the exams for over-time examinations? Living expenses and allowances'll make me declare bankruptcy."

So he said, but looking at his face it was clear that wasn't his true sentiment.

"It might be best for you to go ahead and do that."

Told such by Yuki, Toshio wore a broad smile.

"But, Shimoyama-san will be a problem. I'm gonna end up strangled to death by his wife."

"Then, it's good that you're prepared to be strangled to death. If you need help, please say as much."

Shimoyama smiled, Toshio laughed, and then lightly bowed his head.

"---Thank you."

sinnesspiel

2

The next day, Toshio was woken by a phone call. It was a phone call to notify him of the death of Maeda Iwao who lived in Kami-Sotoba. They said even if the family called his name, he wouldn't wake up. They didn't think he was breathing, and that it was possible he was dead. He replied that he'd go right away but until that day Toshio had never gone on a house call to the Maeda household. They must have been a family without much need for a doctor but at any rate he asked for directions on the phone.

While preparing to go out, his mother Takae awoke and came in.

"Another one?"

Even Takae understood that an early morning phone call meant a death notice. The deaths had continued to the point where she couldn't not know.

"Seems like it," Toshio answered.

"Just what is going on?" Takae's voice was pregnant with urgency. Toshio looked back at his mother's face which was a mixture of anger and unease.

"This is how many times you've gone out like this? Something is happening in the village. Why are so many one after another...."

Who knows, Toshio answered coldly while moving to leave the main wing of the house when his mother grabbed his arm.

"It can't be that it's an epidemic, right?"

Toshio turned back to look at Takae in surprise. ---Right, if it came this far, it'd be stranger not to suspect it.

"....I don't know."

"You don't know! This many people are continuing to die, you realize?"

"I won't deny it looks like an epidemic. But running the tests nothing turns up a positive result. Going by the rest results it's not an epidemic. So all I can say is I

don't know."

"But it's spreading isn't it?"

"This is just between us but probably."

Takae pulled the white coat from Toshio's hand. "You will not be going. You tell them to call an ambulance!"

"Mom."

"It's contagious isn't it? And not knowing what it is means that you cannot take preventative measures, doesn't it? You do know that running around like that every time someone dies puts you in the most dangerous position of all?"

Toshio sighed and patted Takae's shoulder lightly.

"I'm being careful enough. ---Now that I've been called, I can't not go."

"It can be someone other than you can it not?"

"The bunch in the village still haven't realized anything. I can't give them any inadvertent warnings, so I can't so easily just leave it to another doctor."

"This is no joke! Why should it be you who has to do something so dangerous? If by some chance something happens, what then!"

"But,"

"You are an only child, do you realize that? If you die, what will happen to the hospital. You still don't have a successor you know. Kyouko-san won't stay in the home, and---"

Toshio sighed. He took back his white coat from Takae's hand. "If it comes to it, you can adopt one who's turned out well from one of the relatives," Toshio said with a smile. "Or if not that, how about you get remarried, Mom?"

"Toshio!"

"....I'm going off." Toshio turned back around and took off in a small jog towards the hospital. He took his bag and got into the car. It was about to be six o'clock but the surroundings were a little dark. The nights were getting longer.

To Takae she was "worrying about her son," he thought as he drove. It wasn't as if she particularly saw a son as a tool to continue the family. For Takae, it was impossible to consider herself separately from the family. Takae was a part of the Ozaki line, and Ozaki was the foundation on which Takae stood. Her son would succeed the Ozakis of which she had been swallowed as a part of. For Takae she was entrusting the most valuable thing to her own son, and because it was her son, she thought it appropriate to hand it over to him. Toshio as the successor was to accept that, and to share in participating in the honor of continuing the Ozaki line; this was nothing more than the manifestation of love itself, to Takae.

Unfortunately for Takae her son did not share in her values. Toshio had no attachment to Ozaki. In fact he came to feel it as a restraint. Toshio was no longer a child who cursed it to the point of saying Ozaki should just die out but he thought that if it was going to die out, he wouldn't mind if it did. At the very least he didn't appear to be taking any proactive measures to prevent it.

Even so the reason Toshio returned to the village wasn't for the sake of Ozaki but for the villagers who were depending on Ozaki. He didn't want to let them down. He chose a lifestyle of being needed and thanked by the villagers for his own sake rather than staying at the University while being absorbed in political considerations.

---We aren't tools to continue the family.

Yes, that was what the successor of the mountain temple had said. It was when they were still kids unsure of their life course.

--We are individual human beings with free will. So, we have the right to live as we like, I think.

It wasn't just their families but the villagers too had expectations of Toshio and Seishin to continue the family. But neither Toshio nor Seishin had the obligation to bare that. One's own future should be decided by their own free will. But, Seishin had said, is choosing another future in order to disobey other's expectations ultimately really free will?

It was only natural that the villagers held expectations for Toshio and Seishin. Anyone would wish for there to be a doctor and anyone would wish for a head monk. Indeed the doctors and the temple were better to have than not.

Nevermind if they were something unnecessary, they were clearly a necessity, and continuing to provide that was up to each of them. ---In the end, Toshio chose the path of remaining in the village as a doctor.

The village was isolated in the mountains, and just like villages all over Japan the young people were migrating out with nothing but old people left behind. They needed a doctor. So he became that. It wasn't self-sacrifice. He chose the life of being needed and thanked by others.

(And yet, I can't do anything....)

Toshio gripped the steering wheel. Since summer, the vigorously increasing number of deaths, that many people dying, were so abnormal that even Takae was suspicious and yet even now he couldn't find a plan for resolving it. The patients continued to increase. Since it started the fatality rate was one hundred percent, and he couldn't even grasp the mechanism by which it lead to death.

He arrived at the Maeda house in a dark mood. A middle aged woman stood waiting impatiently in the lit entryway of the prototypical farm house. After driving the car onto the property he hurried up.

"Doctor, I'm sorry."

"You're...."

Bowing her head quickly was Maeda Motoko. She was the mother whose child was hit by a car in the middle of the summer who came rushing in.

"For that time... thank you." Motoko said as if embarrassed, her head down.

"It's been a while. How's Shigeki-kun been after that?"

"Thanks to you it was nothing in particular. Truly, I was very rude at that time."

Maeda Shigeki was carried in in July, wasn't it? He already thought of that as a long time ago. It was already October, so more than two full months had passed since then.

"Glad it wasn't anything serious."

When Motoko motioned him into the house there was a middle aged man standing alone in the entryway, standing as if to close off the path. It was probably Motoko's husband.

"The one who's not moving is your father-in-law?"

Yes, Motoko nodded and lead further inside. Crossing over the six tatami mat living room, there were two futons spread out, and at the side of one of those an elderly woman sat.

"Aa---Doctor, his breathing, the old man's breathing is...."

The one on her hands turning to face him was probably Motoko's mother-in-law. Toshio nodded and sat beside the bed. Laid out was a man past sixty. The shadow of death was already showing itself on him. For the time being Toshio took his pulse. There were no palpitations, his blood pressure was zero, and his pupils dilated.

"....He is gone."

His wife suddenly broke down crying. Seeing that, Toshio turned his eyes to Motoko who was hiding her face.

"Was he sick?"

Yes, Motoko nodded.

It was about three days ago that Motoko noticed her father-in-law Iwao's change in state. He seemed very sluggish, and he had no appetite. She thought his pallor was poor too. A long while ago, there were leaflets being passed out. Motoko remembered what they said, so she thought that Iwao might have had anemia. The leaflets instructed to go to the doctor. So Motoko also suggested to Iwao how about going in. But, "I won't," Iwao said.

Iwao was healthy, proud of the fact that since becoming sixty even at his age he had never once been sick. Maybe that was why he had an inclination to criticize anyone who slept but whose illness wasn't managed with that. In truth, he didn't have any specific illness, no cold nor stomach ache nor anything keeping him bedridden. Every day, he was health and went out into the mountains and paddy fields. Iwao who was like that looked sluggish even to outsiders, so Motoko couldn't stop worrying about it but it seemed that Iwao didn't care for that. He had no need of a doctor, he insisted obstinately.

"I am not hurting anywhere."

The one who agreed with this was her mother-in-law Tomiko.

"That's right. Ojii-san is of a strong nature. In the first place you worry too much. You're kicking up a fuss right away."

"But..."

Tomiko raised her voice. "Well, Ojii-san is a child of man, of course he will get just a little sick from time to time! But, it can be cured by going into the mountains and sweating it off! Those who get sick? It's because they're not taking care of themselves! Ojii-san has been working hard all this time, getting up early, and not staying up late. He neither drinks nor smokes. So what in that would you say is ill?!"

"Yes.... but...."

"Enough," Iwao said frankly in poor humor. "I'll go to bed early tonight. That will cure it."

After that Motoko kept her mouth closed without pushing strongly anymore but as expected she couldn't help that it was on her mind. Iwao wasn't just healthy, he was in high spirits for an old man, and when he was in poor humor he was nagging and critical. It wasn't like him to keep his mouth shut aside from saying the minimal amount necessary, and while when he was displeased it was enough for Motoko and others to cower in fear, he wasn't aspiring to be terrifying. And the next day he didn't look to be cured. Iwao and Tomiko persisted as ever that it was nothing but when Motoko couldn't bare her unease and, flustered, opened her mouth, the two became angry with her.

Neither Iwao nor Tomiko had liked Motoko's timidity to start with. Being fearful and prone to worry was to Iwao and his wife a weakness, and weakness was not a good thing. You don't speak clearly, you hem and haw whenever talking about anything, you worry too much, you're always getting headaches and stomachaches, Motoko's in-laws complained of her. Motoko was like that, so their grandchildren were also neurotic, they always shouted at Motoko. She herself was actually quite aware that she was too faint hearted, so Motoko was eager not to worry, not to brood, but she never did manage her father and mother-in-law's approval.

"In what way was he sick?" Asked by Toshio, Motoko said he 'felt' off. Toshio

sighed. "Medically speaking?"

"No... Ojii-chan had said that it would improve if he slept, so...."

Tomiko's face snapped up. "That's right. It's true, he has never once been bedridden. Well, he was a sturdy person, he'd never taken poor care of himself!"

Okay, was all Toshio said. "Probably acute heart failure. Beyond that, I won't know unless I do a medical autopsy."

"Autopsy..." Motoko felt her color drain. "Uhm, you're doing to disect Ojii-san?"

"That is not funny!" Tomiko sobbed as her voice raised. "It'd be preposterous to mangle Ojii-san!"

"It's because he hadn't seen a doctor. Essentially, since he didn't die within 24 hours of the last time I saw him, I can't write out a medical certificate."

Tomiko glared at Toshio. "I understand. ---Then, how much do I have to put out for you to write the medical certificate?"

"Mother-in-law!" Motoko cried out, looking between Toshio and Tomiko.

"And what could you mean by that?"

"Isn't that what this is about? If I don't put out what's to be put out, you're saying you won't put out a medical certificate."

"That isn't what I'm saying." Even an outsider could tell that Toshio was in a foul mood. "You're the one saying your husband was healthy. Just why is it that a healthy person would suddenly die? Something was wrong with him. But I guess that you don't want to know what was wrong with him."

"Knowing something like that doesn't make it something we can take back now.."

"Well, that's true." Toshio's voice held naked thorns. "You can't take back not bringing him to a doctor when he was sick."

Tomiko glared at Toshio and then turned to face Motoko.

"It's because you're always being such a burden!"

Without thinking, Motoko stepped back, blinking.

"Go to the hospital, the hospital, you say that on a daily basis! Because you make a big fuss over nothing! That's why Ojii-san--that's why!"

Tomiko fell prostrate to the ground as if losing her words, voice raising up in a sobbing wail. Motoko's husband Isami rushed over to pat his mother's back. Toshio patted Motoko's shoulder as she huddled into herself. He quietly ushered her out of the room.

"....It'd be best not to mind too much. Obaa-chan's on edge."

"Yes...."

Toshio sighed. "It's because I blamed her. I have no excuse. Well, Iwao-san himself is probably regretting having too much faith in his own health."

That's true, Motoko mumbled. "Uhm, the autopsy?"

"I won't force it. To be honest I want to push it but, I can't very well ignore the wishes of the bereaved family. It's just, I can't write 'cause unknown' on a medical certificate, that is the truth."

"Yes... I am very sorry."

"I wonder if I can at least get a blood sample, though. I'd like even the smallest amount you can give me. If I can't have that, it's going to be a problem on my end too, so."

"Yes, but," Motoko looked towards the six mat room. Would Tomiko really give the okay?

"I'll be doing post-death procedures, so if you could just get your mother in law out of her seat. At that time, I'll manage something."

Motoko felt unsure but nodded. Toshio said his thanks and returned to the six mat room. He explained it to Tomiko and had her leave her seat. Told to bring a change of clothes, Motoko went to seek them out.

"Mom, did something happen?"

When she went to the second story, Shigeki and Shiori were uneasily peeking their faces out from their room.

"A little bit," Motoko said as if she were talking in her sleep. "We have a guest,

so don't come out of your room."

Looking over the two as they nodded, Motoko felt something in her stomach.

She should tell them properly. That grandpa died. But, she didn't know how to convey his sudden death. She cramped at the idea of hurting them by telling them artlessly. ---Wasn't it unjust of her mother in law to say like that that she worried too much? Actually, Motoko herself thought that she over-thought some things. Wavering like this, telling a lie for the time being, might have done them unnecessary harm. In the end, she couldn't come to a decision on what to do without consulting someone to tell her 'let's do this.'

Breathing a heavy sigh, Motoko entered the closet. Until he was placed in the coffin in the white funeral robes, it was customary for them to wear normal sleepwear, a yukata, or otherwise a kimono. Tomiko had said a yukata, so a yukata would likely be fine. Digging through the drawers, she took out as nice of one as she could find.

(And now, we're having a funeral too...) Motoko thought absently. It was summer when the old people had died in Yamairi. Just a while ago there was another funeral. An acquaintance of her friend Kanami---to be more specific, someone Kanami's mother had gotten along well with had died, it seemed. At Kanami's Chigusa, since summer, gossip of the continuing deaths and many funerals flowed. Actually, Motoko had heard frequent talk of a funeral here or there, and had actually caught sight of the scenes of people coming out of funerals. This year is strange, so everyone was saying. Each time Motoko only responded with "It is." It was true that there were many casualties. --At least, it was true that there was a lot of talk of death.

(But...)

Motoko suddenly felt oncoming goosebumps. It had just been a matter of talk before but it became a truth in her very presence. This was death. It was what was continuing, since this summer.

Motoko turned to see the scene behind her. Her uneasily nodding two children.

(Outsiders have come...)

Motoko shook her head. This and Iwao's death had no connection. It wasn't as if Iwao had died in an accident.

(Outsiders... in the village...)

Unrelated. So, there shouldn't have been anyone to come and snatch Motoko's children away.

---As long as they don't go near the national highway it'll be all right.

Motoko firmly convinced herself.

sinnesspiel

3

"Say, Tatsu-san, have you heard?" Ohtsuka Yaeko came running to the storefront of Takemura. "The Maeda's Iwao-san died, they're saying!"

Heh? The one to raise his voice was Satou Oitarou.

"That old pops did? I didn't think there was anyone as healthy as him, too!

When Tatsu asked when, Yaeko answered that it was that morning.

"In the morning when Tomiko-san woke up, he had gone cold next to her. What a shock it must have been, yes?"

"I wonder what it could have been," Ohkawa Namie said making a sullen face. "Why are this many people dying, I wonder, this year. Our Matsumura-san's place's daughter died too, just lately. Tomio oversaw the funeral."

"Well, my," Yaeko nodded. "Ours, too. The Ohtsuka Sawmill's son died too."

It was Hirosawa Takeko who had said isn't it strange. "Somehow or another, isn't something strange? So many dying like this. It's been since this summer, hasn't it? I mean, back in Yamairi, it was five people."

"Five people," Oitarou blinked in surprise. "Were there that many?"

"There were!" Takeko said indignantly. "There were the three from Yamairi weren't there, then there was the Ohtsuka's son, and wasn't there the Muramatsu's daughter? That's five people, isn't it!"

Yaeko waved her hand. "I'm telling you, Iwao-san died like I said. It's six people, I'm telling you," said Yaeko, tilting her head. "Eh? No, we just talked about this recently, didn't we?"

Ah, Oitarou clapped his hands. "Nakano's son! Come to think of it he died."

"Oh me," Ohkawa Namie counted on her fingers. "Then, seven people?"

"Now hold on, there's still more. Look,the Shimizus' daughter is dead, isn't

she? And then, Ohkawa. Namie-san, weren't they relatives of yours? Ohkawa's Shigeru-kun who died."

"That's right," replied Namie with a bewildered face. "Then what? Nine people?"

"That can't be right," Takeko said naming them off while counting on her fingers. "Seven, eight, nine... Well my, it really is nine people!"

Tatsu swallowed a breath. Something chilled in the pit of her stomach.

"We're forgetting the resident officer."

Ah, the old people's voices rose out. Each of them took on a dumbfounded expression. Tatsu watched over that, reciting it in her mind all the more. That wasn't all, she'd seen how many cars coming and going for funerals. The Yasumori contractors had a funeral too, and the Maruyasu saw mill had a death too. She didn't know who the others were but she'd seen at least two or three more cars at least. ---That number was abnormal.

"That's, I'm not Ikumi-san but, it's strange. Something's definitely happening." Oitarou wiped at his face like a cat.

"Strange, isn't it..." Takeko tried taking a peek at the other's faces. "I mean, it wasn't like there were any accidents. Everyone died from a disease, right?"

"It can't be that it's an epidemic, can it?" Oitarou said, Namie waving her hand.

"That can't be. If it were an epidemic we'd be told this and that by the Health Department. You know, we'd be isolated and all. If I recall, you can't bury them if it's an epidemic. I'd heard that a long time ago from my father."

"But if that's not it, how are this many people dying? And in three months--- no, really, it's August and September, that's within two months."

"But it's not an epidemic."

The one to timidly, hesitantly raise her voice was Yaeko. "You don't think it could really be a curse or...?"

"A curse, what's this?"

"I don't quite get it but... Ah, look, there have been Koushin-samas broken

here and there haven't there? It I recall, the Koubou-sama at the Shrine was broken too. A curse from that or..."

"How foolish," Takeko laughed from her nose. "Aren't you being influenced by Ikumi-san too much? If not her, then it's the Ohtsuka Sawmill's influence."

"No I'm not! That's, even I think it's foolish but, still, it's strange, isn't it?"

"Keep it down now," Tatsu interposed. She could see Ikumi coming down the village road before the shop. Following Tatsu's gaze, the elderly all at once closed their mouths.

"Well my, Ikumi-san, it's been a while," Yaeko called out with an unnaturally cheerful voice. Ikumi laughed, then moved to pass by the shop. "Oh my, Ikumi-san, not stopping in?"

Ikumi's feet came to a stop. "Maybe in a bit. I'm busy you know, personally."

"What's the mattert," Oitarou asked in a surprised seeming voice. "Didn't you hear? Maeda's Iwao-san died, they say."

Yes, Ikumi laughed. She gave an ostentatious sigh. "I knew this was coming but it's still piteous. Then, I wonder if I shouldn't stop in on them a bit, perhaps? What a hassle it is, I really am just so busy."

Tatsu's brows furrowed. "You, you'd go to a house having a funeral and talk about curses?"

"Dear me. But I really must tell them. After all. If it keeps continuing it will be a problem, won't it? When one dies, they say they pull the family with them after all."

"What a diligent worker you are," Tatsu said, tone laced with sarcasm, but Ikumi gave a good humored laugh.

"They're so thankful to me. Well, of course there are people who just don't understand, but this world isn't all those who don't see the truth. Lately, people have been coming to me for exorcisms."

Well, my, Takeko said eyes wide.

"How is the direction of their house, things like that, they're consulting me. This too is a way of helping others, so of course I feel good giving them a

consultation, but."

Tatsu gave a curt nod. That's it, she thought. That was why Ikumi was in such high spirits.

"We're not strangers, now, if something happens, all of you do say something to me! Especially Yaeko-san and Namie-san, yes? You have dead relatives don't you? Do be careful now!"

sinnesspiel

4

When Tamo Sadaihci poked his head into the office, Seishin was just taking a break after the end of one memorial service. The only one in the office was Seishin. Mitsuo was running about on various errands while Tsurumi and the others were hurrying about for memorial services. The services for the deaths since summer had started working the temple staff to the brink of their own deaths.

"Junior Monk, have you heard?"

Heard what, Seishin asked Sadaichi as Sadaichi made a greatly troubled expression. "It's about Masaji-san of Naka-Sotoba, but."

Seishin's back tensed. It was the Naka-Sotoba's manager, old man Koike. "Something happened to Masaji-san----?"

"Well, that's just it. It's not what happened to Masaji-san but in his son's family, they've left."

Seishin started as if poked in a blind spot. "They've left?"

"Right. Last night you see, there was a Shrine Parish meet and greet. Were you aware that Naka-Sotoba's San'Yasu had moved?"

"Yes, I had heard."

"The San'Yasu's Seiichirou-san was Naka-Sotoba's Village Administration's manager, and since that person suddenly moved on us, we can't go without replacing him. Soon enough we'll have to be thinking about November's Kagura. And so, for the time being we were going to try to consult with the Koike's Masaharu-san. ---Well, even if we called it a meeting, since it was that kind of talk, it wasn't much different from idle chat, though. As usual everyone drank into the night, grumbling over our cups but, then from there when Masaji-san went home, the people from his house weren't there, is the story."

That can't be, Seishin blinked.

"Masaji-san was shocked, then a call came. He was worried about what on earth was going on, but then this morning came---just a little while ago. One of the neighbors informed hi that while Masaji-san was out, the usual Takasago Movers were there, they came by!"

"They had moved? Leaving behind Masaji-san? Without consulting with him about it?"

That's exactly rightt, Sadaichi said perplexed. "Junior Monk, you haven't heard anything? From the Ozaki's Junior Doctor."

Seishin saw Sadaichi's imploring face, relying on him. "There's a rumor about a spreading disease, for the record."

"A spreading---disease."

"Since summer, right, haven't there been a lot of them, deaths. There's some kind of bad disease spreading around, isn't there, everyone is saying, but it's said half in jest. All the same, just two days before yesterday, Takemura's Michiko-kun died, didn't he? Wasn't he strange, wasn't it really an epidemic, they said."

It couldn't be, Seishin tried to answer but couldn't. He merely shook his head.

"Junior Monk, what is it? Have I not been hearing various talks of the Junior Monk going out amongst the people to talk with them? Is that---"

"Sadaichi-san," Seishin spoke over him. "I am not able to answer. If you must know, please ask Toshio directly."

Sadaichi kept silent and looked fixedly at Seishin's face.

"....Soon now here, may I call together a ward headman's meeting, I wonder?"

"Before that, one with the village three," Seishin said, to which Sadaichi nodded. Silent and greatly troubled, he let out a deep sigh.

Seishin saw Sadaichi off, left Mitsuo in charge while he was out and left the temple. He went straight towards Naka-Sotoba, visiting old man Koike. Old man Koike sat alone in the middle of a wide house, his back hunched in despondency.

"Koike-san."

Noticing Seishin when he called out to him from the veranda, Koike gave a tiny

nod of salutation. It seemed he knew what Seishin had come for.

"Uhm---I heard from Sadaichi-san."

"Anyways, come on in."

Seishin bowed formally and came in to the living room. Koike was seated, gesturing only with his gaze, as expected not very prone to moving about as if the energy had been taken from him.

"Your son and his family have gone missing?"

Koike nodded deeply. "Honestly... I can't imagine what they're thinking."

"They really have left?"

"Seems so. One of the neighbors saw them piling luggage into a truck after all."

"Yasuo-san stated nothing of his intent?"

Koike shook his head. "No proclamation, nothing left written. When I contacted his work a bit ago, he went and quit three days ago."

He quit, Seishin repeated. Koike's son Yasuo was, if he recalled, employed at NTT in Mizobe.

"Seems he didn't give a reason for quitting. It's a shock. My son, you know, he quit his job without a word to me and took off with his family, I'm pathetic, I'm hurt..." Koike said rubbing at his eyes with the palm of his hand.

"Uhm.... Before hand was there something, had he not said anything like that? Pardon me for asking but was there a dispute of any sort?"

Nothing, Koike said as if casting it out. "When I came back last night, the house was all dark. Anyone and everyone wouldn't be asleep at that hour, these days my granddaughter is quite the night owl, you see. And then, I thought something happened. Thought maybe my grandson had gotten sick, or." Koike's mouth warped in self derision. "When it comes to the child, you know, he'd been sick since the day before yesterday. He was dizzy when he stood up, sat down right after getting out of the bath. We were letting him sleep."

Seishin watched Koike's trembling mouth in shock.

"Yasuo was in a daze like too, and his wife seemed to be slipping in energy too.

With my grandson like that on top of it, the older grandchild looked pale faced, I thought the family had all caught a cold together. ....And I thought that when it wasn't nothing of the sort, they were hiding something in their hearts, just holding something silently in. I can't tell if they felt guilty towards me or held a grudge towards me."

"....Koike-san."

Koike shook his head without meaning. "I didn't think about any of that, when I saw the lights of the house were out, I thought maybe the youngest child was sick and they took him to the hospital, you know. When they get scared, they'd take him..."

"Please wait a moment. Koike-san."

Seishin leaned forward towards Koike. "He was ill? The youngest child--he was Ikuo-kun, wasn't he? If I recall."

"Yes."

"Ikuo-kun, what condition was he in? Did he have a fever?"

No, Koike blinked with depression-sunken eyes. "It didn't seem like he had a fever, did it? Cerebral anemia, they said that was probably what it was. He was a thin boy to start with, he was prone to anemia, low blood pressure, things like that. His face was pure white like paper, but there was no fever."

"Did he have a headache, or nausea or...?"

"No. He didn't especially say anything about that."

"This was the day before yesterday?"

"Haa."

"How about Yasuo-san. The other people? Did it have the same feeling?"

"The oldest child had the same feeling. Like she was in a daze. ---No, the one in a daze was Yasuo, was it? It was what you might call sluggish or what you might call sleepy. The expression was odd.. I thought maybe someone was drunk or something."

"Please wait a moment. Who is this discussing? The oldest---Touko-chan? Or perhaps Yasuo-san?"

Well, uhm, Koike grumbled. "I... don't right now."

"Is it possible that everyone was in a similar state?"

When Seishin said it, Koike returned Seishin's stare flabbergasted, murmuring that he guessed they were. "They were---that's right. Indeed, everyone was in the same way. All of them like they were in a daze, how should I put it, like there was a glaze over their eyes, it was like. They were strangely still, their eyes were. Yet it felt like they weren't looking at anything---"

"Like they were possessed...?"

"That's right, like that."

"That was from the day before yesterday?"

"The day before yesterday---wasn't it? Or was it the day before that. Either way, it was about them."

"That is around the same time that Yasuo-san had quit, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's right. It would come out to that, wouldn't it?"

It can't be, Seishin thought. If it were the case, an entire family would have an outbreak, would it not? It was too similar to the disease's preliminary symptoms. And suddenly, quitting his job, and then moving. The part about quitting his job even was just like Shimizu Ryuuji and the others. It was only what came after that was different----.

"Did Yasuo-san and his family go out to anywhere recently? Even if it isn't outside of the village, within the village will do. For example, did they go into the mountains, or did they go to Yamairi, or...."

"No, not in particular..."

"Then, did they visit somebody, did somebody come to visit them, anything like that?"

"I don't think they saw anyone in particular either," Koike said and then continued as if remembering. "Come to think of it, his wife said she had met the

master of Kanemasa."

Seishin's brows furrowed. "Kirishiki-san----was it?"

"Haa. At night she was going around passing out the circular notices, and on the way back she said she'd met the good sir of the Kirishiki's. She said she'd stood around talking with him for a while. When she said do come by sometimes, the wife said she would bring her daughter. Their daughter seems to be the same age as my youngest grandson. It seems they said that, but since then I haven't heard any talk about them coming, huh?"

"Is that right...."

Was there some kind of incident, or were they bitten by any bugs, even something as small as that, he had said to him but Koike didn't seem to be able to remember anything especially worth mention. For the time being he comforted him, then Seishin took leave of Koike's house. On the way back, he passed by the front of the Ozaki clinic and stopped his car.

Whether this should be conveyed to Toshio or not---Seishin was wavering, a bit. Toshio was tired. Impatient over the grave state of affairs, he was gasping under the emotional pessure. In truth, Toshio wouldn't see Seishin's spare time spent on the movers as anything other than a waste of time. He understood his feelings. His irritation, and his helplessness too. That was why he lingered, hesitating to give him the trouble of relaying Koike's story to him.

But, there was a chance of a full family outbreak. Seishin couldn't ascertain if it was but if Toshio heard the story directly from Koike, he may have been able to ascertain it. Hesitating over what to do, in the end, Seishin got out of the car and went towards the clinic back yard.

It was Sunday but the entryway was open. Seishin had head from Toshio on the phone that they were keeping it open. So he peered into the aiting room but he didn't catch sight of Toshio. He must have been in the middle of an examination. He worried over whether to try calling for him or not.

For the time being he let himself into the waiting room and wrote a memo to leave behind. What to do with it---Was for Toshio to decide, wasn't it?

Toshio saw the memo when he returned to the waiting room during his lunch

break. It said that old man Koike's family moved, that Yasuo quit his job without notice, and then the whole family had been sick. That at least from what he had heard, it resembled the preliminary symptoms---.

If you like, please listen to Koike's story, Seishin finished up but Toshio threw out the memo. That they were sick had his interest but he didn't have enough time to waste on movers. Ever since that morning when he'd been roused out of bed, his entire body felt like mud with exhaustion.

It wasn't like he didn't care. But, he saw it as Seishin's excuse. He was trying to force a connection between the sickness and moving, like he was trying to justify his actions.

It doesn't have to be now. ---Toshio thought that, throwing himself down on the sofa and closing his eyes.

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5

Murasako Munetaka stopped the rice mill and stepped out of the warehouse. Munetaka's house was the only rice shop in the village. It wasn't exceptionally good nor bad business but in recent years the rice trade had completely changed. The shop couldn't help but change with it. There was also the fact that the Mizobe workers in the same trade had expanded their delivery routes, making it so that lately even on Sunday they couldn't close.

Even so, his father Munehide was still healthy, and his wife Chizuko didn't dislike managing the shop. He was unsure when the decision was made to be open year around but when actually doing it it wasn't that much of a stressor. They still had two children on their hands, it was probably hard on Chizuko to handle along with the house work but she'd never given any complaints about this. Maybe it was in gratitude to Chizuko for that, or maybe it was just because his grandchildren were so cute, Munehide looked out for them, saying he would watch the house so take the kids out somewhere to play.

Returning from the warehouse to the top, Chizuko came hurrying out from within as if she couldn't wait. "Honey---Hiromi doesn't seem right."

Munetaka took off his gloves, looking to Chizuko's face. "Doesn't seem right?"

"He's dead limp and has no energy. But, he doesn't have a fever and there are no signs of diarrhea."

Hm, Munetaka murmured. Come to think of it at lunch time Hiromu seemed unusually calm, he thought.

"What did Hiromi say?"

"Nothing," Chizuko shookherhead. "I even asked if he hurt anywhere but he just looked at me blankly."

"Guess it's a cold?"

At Munetaka's words, Chizuko murmured in a low voice. "I wonder if Masako-kun didn't do something to him again?"

"Chizuko." Munetaka's voice was challenging. Chizuko looked up at him sharply.

"You always cover forhim like this but it's for sure that Masako-kun bullies Hiromi. He has strange bruises, all the time. Hiromi's threatened to keep his mouth shut. But, Chika even says so, and even Hiromi doesn't deny it."

Munetaka sighed. "But still..."

"Masao-kun doesn't like Hiromi. Or Chika. He just can't stand that Ojii-chan shows more interest in Hiromi and Chika."

"The old man spoils Masao more than enough."

"To Masao-kun, it's not enough. Until he had grandchildren, all of Ojii-chan's attention went to Masao!"

Munetaka half believed half doubted. Munetaka always said that his old man Munehide was soft on Masao but even Munetaka thought he himself was soft on him. He wasn't a child anymore but he treated Masao like a child who still needed his protection.

All the same, Chizuko said biting her lip. The be honest, Chizuko didn't get along well with Masao. It was something Chizuko herself was self-conscious of.

Chizuko was drawn to Munetaka's bright, undistorted disposition and married him. From that same Chizuru's point of view, Masao was dark and overly distorted. He was always rolling his eyes at people, and due to that habit, never made to look people in the eye. He watched with eyes that seemed to be looking to catch one with their guard down, looking for ways to test people, to pick fights.

--Dear sister-in-law, what do you like about Nii-san?

When they decided to wed and she had met him countless times, she was asked that by Masao. When she answered that it was that he was bright and unwarped, that he was popular, an abject smile rose to Masao's face.

---Then, you must hate someone like me, huh? I wonder if you won't be able to

stand living with me.

He made a face as if expecting her to say 'That's not it at all.' He was waiting for the words 'I like you.' While casually holding out the threat that it'd be a hinderance towards living together if she didn't say it, Masao looked to her to be trying to extort her for kind words.

---I don't know yet. I don't know Masao-kun well yet, and all.

--You'll definitely come to hate me. I'm not as well made as Nii-san and all.

Looks like it, she resisted answering, though Chizuko didn't remember how she had answered. What she did remember was that ever since then she did come to hate Masao. All in all, Chizuko wasn't pleased with her little brother in law. It was also creepy, the eyes he made at her in the summertime or when she got out of the bath. She caught sight of him countless times fixedly staring at her undergarments she hung out to dry, and ever since, she started handling her under garments while Masao was at school.

"Say, do you think it might be better to bring him to the hospital?"

"That's right," said Munetaka with a seemingly troubled smile. "Let's keep an eye on him and if it seems like he really is sick, it will be better to have brought him in."

"That's no good. If we don't go right away... Something is wrong with him. What if it's because he was hit in the head?"

Oi, Oi, said Munetaka, eyes wide. "You're over-thinking it."

Chizuko shook her head. "I'm scared. Haven't there been funerals going on here and there lately? It might be my imagination but I'm still very uneasy!"

"Well, there are indeed a lot of funerals lately." Munetaka's expression clouded. "But still that's got nothing to do with Hiromi does it? You can't think like that?"

Chizuko once again shook her head and Munetaka said all right. "Then, first thing tomorrow---"

"Can't we go now? The Ozaki Clinic is open on Sundays these days too."

"Heh. ---We could still make it in time, huh. Let's take him now. If it's nothing,

Chizuko'll be more relaxed, too, huh?"

"Thank you."

Keeping Chika at her side, Chizuko changed the unenergetic Hiromi's clothing quickly. Taking Hiromi's hand, they got into Munetaka's car as Masao was returning.

"Heh, you're going out."

"Hiromi's sick. We're just going to the hospital, we'll be right back." Munetaka said, a faint smile rising on Masao's face as he looked at Hiromi. "Aniki's soft on Hiromi, isn't he? Even though when I get a cold, he just says sleep it away."

Munetaka didn't look at Masao was he got into the car.

"Isn't it nice to be taken such good care of, Hiromi?"

Masao peered into the back seat, and without thinking Chizuko glared at him. Masao seemed to want to say something but since the car had taken off, he kept silent.

The Ozaki Clinic wasn't as packed as it was on a weekday. Without having to wait long he was taken into the examination room for a medical interview. Chizuko conveyed her fear to Toshio that "I was thinking it might be possible he was hit in the head."

"Hit in the head? In what situation?"

"No, just that that might have happened, I thought. --This boy, he's awkward and always running into things, or falling down the stairs."

Oh, was all Toshio answered but with an expression that seemed concerned. The examination took some time. It was unusually thorough, Chizuko thought.

"Nothing's abnormal with his head." When Toshio said this, there were no other patients left. There were only Munetaka, Chizuko and Hiromi, three people left. "But, he does have anemia." Toshio's tone was almost as if he were pronouncing that he had an incurable disease. "It's possible it's severe anemia. We'll keep an eye on how it progresses."

Chizuko's face went blue. Munetaka's color changed likewise.

"That's, for example, like leukemia or..."

"At the current stage I can't say. Anyways, I'll make you an appointment so can I have you come in tomorrow too?"

Chizuko looked to Munetaka as if asking for help. If Munetaka could do it, if it would take away Chizuko's unease, then he planned to bring him in even if only for that. He didn't think that he would have Toshio making such a face at him.

It can't be, he thought. ...I never thought that a funeral's going to come from our place too.

"...That is, is it something terribly bad?"

With all the ease of a childhood friend, Munetaka peered into Toshio's eyes. He wanted to ask for the truth.

"I really can't say anything at this stage. Just, there are several forms of anemia. Depending on the type it can fall into something worse, so I don't want us to take our eyes off of it. Hiromi-kun is still small and all."

"Ah..... Mm."

"It'd be good to keep an eye on how often he goes to the bathroom and the color of his urine. If there's blood in his urine, I don't care if it's in the middle of the night, bring him in. Even if it's something else, if his condition suddenly gets worse--for example, if it seems like he's suffocating, call me."

Aa, Munetaka answered while feeling his hand shake. It can't be--this can't be happening.

Picking up his son who had become much heavier he got into the car. Settled into the back seat, Chizuko who sat next to him held him as if protecting him from something terrifying. On the way home, for the very short drive, Munetaka and Chizuko said nothing.

When they returned to the home, Munehide made a sour face. "Where have you been at this hour?"

"I'm sorry," Chizuko apologized. "Hiromi is suck. So we went to the hospital."

What, said Munehide looking at Hiromi's face.

"I'll put him to bed," was all Chizuko said, taking Hiromi's hand and going to the second story. Munehide gave an unsatisfied look to Munetaka.

"Even so was it something you both had to go for? What time do you think it is. When I came back from deliveries, there was no salesperson here. No signs of doing evening preparations either."

"Masao came back from going out, though."

"He closed himself up in his room and won't come out. You think you can leave just him behind at the empty shop and expect him to be useful? ---And? Is Hiromi all right?"

About that, Munetaka hesitated. "It might be a complicated disease, he said. It seems to be anemia but there're different forms of anemia, so, he said."

Munehide had visible confusion in his eyes.

"But it looks like we don't know anything for certain yet. Anyway, he said to bring him in tomorrow too. He said if he gets any worse to call him, with a serious like face."

Munehide kept silent.

"What, Hiromi's really sick?"

At that voice, they turned around to see Masao peering into the store. Aa, said Munetaka's voice, becoming naturally lower.

Heh, said Masao. "So that's why Ane-san's face looked like that. Lately, there've been a lot of deaths and all."

"Masao, this is no time to say such ill omened things."

Being scolded by Munehide, a thin smile rose on Masao's face.

"It's true isn't it? Lately, it's been nothing but funerals. Isn't it better not to think that we're special? Probability isn't concerned with emotions or personal feelings after all."

"Masao!" Hidemasa's voice raised. "Is that any way to talk?!"

Masao flinched but soon another thin smile rose. "But, isn't it true?"

"Masao," Munetaka interposed. "Stop it. This isn't funny. Hiromi is really sick.

It might be a complicated disease."

Heh, Masao murmured. "Well, these things happen. There're no people who don't die after all. That you're making that face about it is proof that we've just been special until now."

Before Munetaka could shout Masao's name, Munehide yelled. "You, what the hell are you talking like that for! Don't you have any feelings!"

"What..." Masao took a step back. "I'm just saying."

"Is that something you'll joke about lightly?!"

"I'm not saying it, I'm just saying, someone could say it like that..."

"Enough!" Munehide said as if spitting the words at, looking to Munetaka. "---Where's Chika?"

"Next door. We left her there when we went out."

"I'll go and get her."

Seeing his father leave angrily, Munetaka then turned back to Masao. Masao had a wounded expression, likewise seeing their father off. Noticing Munetaka's stare, he made a face and hurried back upstairs.

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Culture Notes:

8 - 4

Kagura

- A Shinto festival of spiritual dance. The goddess Ame-no-Uzume danced around naked to make an uproar with the other gods to lure the sun goddess Ameterasu out of a cave she had cloistered herself into after a fight with her brother. Specific ritualized dances were performed by miko, or shrine priestesses, said to be descendants of Ame-no-Uzume. Many folk variations formed in different regions. In some, people believe or pretend they're possessed by the gods who come to join in the festivities and dancing. It frequently takes on many elements of street performances including story telling, costumes, acrobats, *etc.*

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1

Mutou opened his eyes to the sound of his alarm clock. Monday, October 3rd.

Rolling over in his bed and breathing a heavy sigh, the sounds of the lively household flooded into his ears. The flurried footsteps trailing around the house were probably Tamotsu's. In that direction, he could hear Aoi's voice saying something. The smell of the breakfast Shizuko made faintly wafted in.

It wasn't bad waking up. Since last week, his wife Shizuko had been helping out at the office, so it was fun. The paperwork that had piled up over the weekend was able to be sorted for the time being too, with Shizuko and Towada's help. It felt like a weight off of his shoulders.

On the other hand, he thought that that was all the exhaustion he had to handle. It was well and good that he could receive help but all the more it reconfirmed how weary Toshio whom nobody could help was by now.

(The Junior Doctor has it hard....)

It was in consideration for that that the nurses put forth the idea of working on the weekends. Yesterday the two nurses who commuted from outside the village moved into the village, and for the time being were staying in properties for rent the Ozaki family owned.

(They're good girls....)

The clinic's staff were a blessing. This had to make it easier on Toshio, didn't it? And even during ordinary times, Toshio cherished his staff, and thinking of that made him feel good. Having Shizuko come as a part timer, Mutou was energized bit it too. Now they could be together on weekends. Towada said he would help too---.

While lingering in his futon, thinking of such things, Shizuko's footsteps came before the bedroom door. He was grateful for the help but it must have been hard on his wife too, he thought. She came to work part time, but other than that was also doing the usual household tasks and cleaning. The reason he

thought about that might have been because he's always heard Yasuyo and Kiyomi's idle complaints about such at the hospital.

"Tohru, that's enough already."

He could hear Shizuko's voice traveling up to the second floor. Tohru's not waking up again, he thought. Even after turning twenty he wouldn't make it to work unless his mom woke him up to go? he thought, finding it at once pathetic and worth a smile.

"Tohru, come on. You're going to be late."

Mutou at last got himself up.

"Hey, are you going to skip today, too?"

While listening to Shizuko's voice as she climbed the staircase, Mutou thought, that's right. Tohru skipped the day before yesterday, Saturday. He remembered Shizuko saying to him as if frustrated; "He says he's skipping because he caught a cold." Shizuko's tone suggested she thought he was just blowing it off.

Sharply, a small something could be felt lodged in his chest but Mutou didn't know why. Just as his ears took in the sounds of the house without particularly meaning to, his head was remembering something he didn't particularly intend to scrutinize.

"---Tohru!"

He could hear Shizuko's loud voice from directly above him. At the same time Mutou stretched hugely, wondering what it was, sensing his own nonchalance in his movements. He had the feeling he was doing something unsuitable. What he was being 'unsuitable' towards he himself didn't know.

Tohru, Shizuko's voice loudly cried out again. Her voice sounded shrill. What's this, he thought while looking up at the ceiling at the same time as, once again, Shizuko's grief stricken voice sounded.

"Dad! Dad!"

Mutou pushed aside his futon and rose. He quickly felt a bad premonition coming on. Ridiculous, he thought. Nothing bad's happened. While thinking that, he flew from the room. He met with Tamotsu looking blankly towards the

stairway. What happened, came that carefree feel again from Aoi this time as she poked her face out of the bathroom.

Mutou ran up to the second story, towards Tohru's bedroom right above his own. Shizuko was crumpled down at the entrance of the room. "---Dad, Tohru is!"

"What is it?"

He had come flying to the room but with Shizuko there clinging to the knees of his pajamas, he couldn't make it in. In Tohru's six tatami mat room the futon was laid out, Tohru lying out in it. The inside of the room was dark due to the curtain being drawn but there was a slim crack in the opening, wavering with the breeze that blew in, at times letting in a clear lay of light.

At one point that light fell over Tohru's sleeping face. Tohru's eyes were half open, looking in the other direction.

"---Tohru."

Mutou tore off Shizuko who was clinging to him, approaching the futon with long strides. Kneeling down, he peered at his son's face, looking into his half opened hollow like eyes, realizing they were indeed opaque. They looked in different directions, unmoving. Not only that, he wasn't blinking. Once more he cried his name while putting a hand to his son's face, feeling the cool temperature against his fingertips.

He had no body head. He was already cold. Far from having the power to turn towards him, his eyes looking in different directions couldn't move, Tohru's body having become hard.

"Tohru... oi!"

It can't be, he thought. This can't be happening. This is some kind of mistake. If he didn't hurry and find where the mistake was, he wouldn't be able to take it back.

"Mom, what's wrong?"

He heard Aoi's voice. Footsteps coming up the stairs. She can't come, Mutou thought turning around. Shizuko sitting in the doorway turned at the same time

towards Aoi who was coming up the stairs, and following after was Tamotsu's voice saying something from below.

(Don't come.)

Nobody could see it. If nobody knew, it wouldn't be true; the absurd throught rose to mind, and at the same time the sense of danger that they shouldn't come closer to something unsafe arose.

"What's wrong?" Aoi asked peering into the room dubiously.

"What's wrong with Onii-chan?"

Nothing, Mutou wanted to say. It's nothing, so go back downstairs. But, Mutou heard his own low voice. He didn't realize he was the one speaking.

"....Call the hospital for me."

"Eh?"

"I'm saying to call the hospital and tell the Junior Doctor to come. Hurry."

"What's wrong with Onii-chan?"

Mutou didn't answer. From behind Aoi, Tamotsu peered in dubiously.

"Is he sick?" He could see Aoi's face stiffen with unease. "Should I, call an ambulance? Would that be..."

"It's fine. Go and call the Junior Doctor."

"But."

"......Onii-chan is dead."

Shizuko remained seating but looked as if she were to spring up. Her expression changed, and like that she crept towards him. They knew Aoi would, Tamotsu would come flying into the room.

"Anyway, make the call!"

He couldn't let them get near Tohru.

"Leave it like it is here and have the doctor come. Tamotsu, bring Mom

downstairs."

But, Tamotsu tread in. He kept back Shizuko who screamed, crawleing towards Tohru with all his might. "Go downstairs. Tamotsu, takeher with you.

"But."

"Just do it!"

He forced Shizuko, nails clawing at the tatami mats, out of the room. Forcing Tamotsu out he slid the door shut. He couldn't let them get close. ---He had to isolate him.

Thinking that, Mutou collapsed on the spot.

It was that. If not then was there any other way his son would pass away so suddenly like this?

"Why....."

He didn't notice it, he should have been faster. Yes, Tohru skipped work on Saturday. He was saying it was a cold. How terrifying were those words? But Mutou didn't realize that. The answer was because Mutou and the others were avoiding realizing it.

They were thinking it was all right. The answer as to why, Mutou knew. Nevermind if he didn't know about the plague, Mutou did know of its existance. So, it couldn't come sneaking up to attack him from the shadows, so he had gotten himself to thinking.

"....How?"

How did he come to such a misunderstanding? Why couldn't he have understood it? Without realizing his son's peril, his son died before his eyes. Whether Mutou realized that or whether he didn't, it could not have changed the result.

He tried to tell himself that but he absolutely could not make himself believe it. If I'd realized it, couldn't I have saved him, he thought. If not for some mistake of his at some point in time, there should have been a chance to fix things. Even now it wasn't too late. There should have been a proper way. Some way to put

everything back in order.

But, it was clear no such way existed.

".....Sorry." Mutou prostrated himself over the tatami floor. "I'm so sorry.... Tohru."

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2

The one to tell Seishin of Mutou Tohru's death was Naka-Sotoba's manager old man Koike.

"The Office's Manager's place's oldest son died," Koike came all the way to the temple to say.

"The office manager---Mutou-san, is it? Tohru-kun?"

"That's right. Junior Monk, what on earth is happening in this village?" Asked by Koike, Seishin was at a loss for a response. "I'm thinking aren't there too many deaths. Not just deaths. Even my son---" At that, Koike's mouth closed. "I, in all my years of living, hadn't seen anything as strange as this before now. Too many people are dying, too many people are going. This strangeness has been going on too long to think of as normal. Until now, the village had been the same as ever. What's happening to the village these days? Doesn't the Junior Monk think so too?"

"....That is true."

"The Junior Monk must know that there are rumors it's an epidemic."

"I have heard."

"As for whether it's true or what, what do you think?"

"I cannot know."

"They say there's something wrong with the Kanemasa's wife and daughter, don't they? We can't go thinking that that's spread to the folks in the village, eh?"

Seishin's brows furrowed. "That is not possible. Kirishiki-san's wife and daughter have a collagen disease called SLE. A collagen disease is not contagious."

"Then, the story that Kanemasa's doing something." Seishin stared back at old man Koike's openly angry face. "It's the people of Kanemasa. It's been weird since they moved in. It's not just me, everyone's saying it."

"That is... unrelated, isn't it? Since they had moved in, so it is said but in truth the deaths had been occurring since before Kirishiki-san had moved in."

"I'm not just talking about the deaths. I'm talking about what's strange in this village. This village has started being out of sorts since that house was built up on the Kanemasa property in the first place."

"Koike-san," Seishin looked into old man Koike's eyes. "When you say out of sorts what, concretely, are you refering to?"

Koike was silent.

"I too will acknowledge that the village is strange. It is certainly true that there have been too many deaths, and that there may be a cause. But it is not related to Kirishiki-san is it? The family had moved in after the string of deaths had begun. I will also acknowledge that there are many moves. And an exceeding number of incomplete transfers. I cannot say what is strange or how, but they are not ordinary moves, and they are continuing is certain, I believe. And with Koike-san's case being the tip of the brush, it is certain that something is strange. I will even acknowledge that the Kanemasa's house is strange. I will even acknowledge that Kirishiki-san and his family are eccentrics. However, what connection are you saying there is between Kirishiki-san living in a strange house and deaths and moves?"

"No... that's."

"How are you saying that they are connected? What are you saying that Kirishiki-san can do? Those who are gone were not by any means killed by anybody. It is clearly a disease. Kirishiki-san's wife and daughter are indeed afflicted with a disease but it is not one that can spread to others. It is futile to seek a connection. Even those people who had moves were by no means kidnapped by anybody."

"That's, it's true, but."

"I am begging with you to please think rationally. I understand that you are

despondent but if Koike-san speaks of things thusly, the people of the village will end up believing it."

"This... wasn't," Koike averted his eyes. "really about my son in particular."

So Koike said but from Seishin's view it was clear that he was being influenced by the shock of being abandoned by his son. He wanted to make that somebody's fault, intending to make the Kirishiki household that had moved in from elsewhere bear that burden. It looked like a step towards unreasonable ostracization.

"At any rate, for now let us focus on Mutou-san's family."

Koike murmured Aa dejectedly. "Right, that's what I came to consult with you about. I had heard from Mutou-san, but the family are parish members?"

Seishin nodded. "Yes. At Mutou-san's mother's thirty second death anniversary, he wishes to transfer her grave site to here."

Seeking the temple's approval to transfer the gravesite, the family entered into the parish. But, Seishin thought. Wasn't she likely cremated? Those of the village were particular about burials. They had a strong resistance to cremation. But, the Mutou family weren't originally those of the village. Until now they had cremated their dead. So they shouldn't have been opposed to it. They would probably be more comfortable with cremation, he thought.

"What shall we do about the burial? Until now they had cremated, and we can allow a grave for depositing ashes."

"No, it's going to go according to the village customs. Seems the Ozaki's Junior Doctor suggested that it'd be better to do it like they always had, though, but the wife said since they're here now..."

Seishin nodded. When Mutou had sought a grave plot, he had originally intended as much. As a member of the village, whatever may come he would leave it in the hands of the Mourning Crew and bury the body in the graveyard, thinking to thusly fully take root in the village. Mutou probably understood the circumstances, so he could be pursued to agree to cremation but he hesitated to push it too strongly now after the fact.

"In things like this, it'll be going all according to custom. I'll be asking you to go

with a fitting posthumous name and to tend to the bedside sutras. The overnight vigil is today, and the service tomorrow, we can do it before noon as usual I was thinking?"

"......Very well."

sinnesspiel

3

When Ritsuko entered the break room, Toshio was already there looking completely exhausted, collapsed into one of the chairs. She said a formal good morning to him but the voice that answered was faint. He made no attempt to meet her gaze, so thinking that he was probably incredibly worn out, she stayed quiet and brewed his coffee.

While she was preparing the coffee, Yasuyo came in to work and Towada had come into work. While she was serving it, Yuki and Satoko had arrived. While aware of how strangely sullen Toshio was, they were talking about how moving was going when Kiyomi came in.

"Mutou-san is running late isn't it."

It happened when Kiyomi looked up at the clock.

"---Mutou-san's not coming," Toshio interposed in a low voice. "They're in mourning."

Eh, Ritsuko looked to Toshio's face. Fatigue was written thickly on his features, as if exceedingly depressed---.

"Did something happen?" The one bracing herself with that question was Yasuyo. Toshio gave a sullen nod.

"Tohru-kun died. He's Mutou-san's place's oldest son."

But that's, Ritsuko was at aloss for words. Who was it whose voice said that it couldn't be, as if questioning it. In response to that, Toshio again gave a sullen nod.

It's that, she thought. Ritsuko had a sense of vertigo. It felt as if she had only been looking straight ahead of her that she hadn't noticed that the ground beneath her feet had been swept out from beneath her from behind.

"But that's..."

"When there's time, I don't care if you take turns going to pay condolences. There's the mourning crew so it seems they have enough help but until everyone sees Mutou-san's face you probably won't be able to calm down. I've got my doubts we'll be finished with appointments by the time the all night vigil's over. Tomorrow just during the funeral, we won't be taking appointments."

Toshio himself couldn't tell whether he was exhausted, whether he was angry. If he was, what was certain was that the target of the sentiment wasn't at Mutou nor even the disease, but himself.

The plague was serious. While he was spinning his wheels in vain, one of his own staff's families bore a victim. Why didn't you notice Tohru's condition, he wanted to blame Mutou, but that was something Toshio himself recognized as unfair. Mutou was even bringing his work home with him. He had even come in to work on the recent day off. His wife Shizuko had even come in with him to help. In those circumstances did he ever even see his son? Nevermind if he were still a young child in need of his parent's oversight, Tohru was a full-fledged adult.

But---those who were afflicted with this illness wouldn't complain of their symptoms themselves. Far from it, the person themselves didn't seem to notice that they were in poor condition. If the family didn't notice, there was nothing to be done.

He should have given more stern warnings. He should have thought more about his staff's safety first, he thought. Just maybe, he should have said, planting terrible worries in their minds. Tohru had to be infected with it through some means. Maybe it was human, maybe it was an intermediary animal. If that was the case he didn't mind. But if---if it were something brought out from the hospital, then. Or if Mutou had a sub-clinical infection.

(This is no time to be thinking about that.)

Right now he was in examination hours. He had to get it together.

So he thought while troubling over what to do, leaning into the chair and letting himself drift in doubts. His eyes came back to his vacant and spacious desk, puzzling over what it was he should have been doing, wondering why he was spacing out like this, without really knowing at all.

He shouldn't have had the time to space out. And yet why was it then that he had no patients before him, no nurse at his side awaiting orders. How could this be, he thought turning to look around him when Ritsuko who had her head bowed looked up. She gave a troubled looking smile.

"....Not yet."

Toshio couldn't grasp the meaning of those words. Ritsuko added on.

"Hirosawa's Toyoko-san."

That's right, he thought. It was time for Hirosawa Toyoko's appointment. That's why he was free right now. Toshio found himself rapidly coming to.

"She hasn't come yet?"

"Yes."

Again, Toshio cursed internally. Why did every last asshole pull this, he felt like raging in a fit. Just at that moment, Kiyomi poked her face into the examining room.

"Doctor, I'll be going first."

Toshio nodded, then called out as an afterthought.

"Sorry but while you're coming back from Mutou-san's place, could you stop by Hirosawa Toyoko-san's place for me?"

Kiyomi blinked. "She hasn't come? ---Yes, understood."

Kiyomi nodded and returned roughly an hour later. Kiyomi made a face as if at a loss.

"How was it?" Toshio asked, and she hesitated.

"Uhm... if it's about Hirosawa-san, then." Kiyomi seemed uncharacteristically subdued. "She isn't there."

"Not there? Did she go out?"

"That's not what I... Uhm, it seems she moved, last night."

Toshio stared fixedly at Kiyomi's face. "What was that?"

"I'm as susprised as you. When I went, nobody was there, it was all locked up. While lingering around wondering if there wasn't an opening somewhere, a neighbor came over, saying 'If you're looking for Hirosawa-san, she moved last night.'"

"That's ridiculous..."

She didn't mention that. He pushed the importance of her coming on her that much, and even Toyoko nodded that she'd come if he recalled.

What's going on, Toshio had started to say when he remembered what Seishin had said. Strange moves were taking place in the village. Right, when was it he'd received the memo? Some family somewhere moved, that before that the family was acting weird, it said----.

Toshio stood up and went to search for the memo when he noticed Kiyomi squirming and shifting as if she wanted to say something.

"---What?"

"No. ...It is completely unrelated, but." Kiyomi said, hemming and hawing, hemming and hawing. "It's just that, it's.... even with Hirosawa-san, something felt.... No, it really does not have anything to do with illness, but."

"What is it?"

"Mutou-san's place's Tohru-san quit his job, they said."

Toshio turned around to look at Kiyomi. "Quit?"

"Yes. Mutou-san didn't even know about it, he called into the company said said that he quit---that was two days before, they said. But... if it was two days before, thinking of the other cases until now, he would have already been sick by that time, wouldn't he....?"

Indeed, thought Toshio. Since he died this morning, Tohru's physical health should have been in decline a few days before.

"It couldn't be that Tohru-kun knew, do you think? About this illness. And so... But, he didn't say anything...."

"It can't be," Toshio said, remembering Seishin's words all the more. "---That can't be the case, right?"

"That's right, isn't it?" As if relieved, Kiyomi let out a small smile. "I'm over thinking it, aren't I?"

Toshio nodded but he felt a chill run down his spine. Tohru commuted out of the village for work. And wasn't Seishin saying that other villagers who commuted out of town for work had suddenly quit their jobs?

Toshio turned towards the waiting room and looked for a folder on top of the desk. All of the notes Seishin had given him, all of them should have been in there.

Fishing around some, he soon found it.

Right, Naka-Sotoba's Koike. His son's family suddenly moved out. Just before that, his son's family seemed to be in bad condition. And his son Yasuo quit his job without old man Koike knowing about it.

On the memo were over 22 full names written. The ones who had moved from here. Toshio looked over that once again and found the name "Maebara Setsu." Setsu was a patient. Even though she had been coming to the hospital for a very long time, now that he thought of it he hadn't seen her face in a while. When was the last time he met her he wondered, groping around in his memory, having the feeling he had heard Setsu's name somewhere.

When was that, hadn't he talked about her with Ritsuko? Right, Setsu had taken too much of her medication.

Toshio sat down in the chair.

(That's right... it was the day of the incident in Yamairi.)

He talked about that with Ritsuko. Setsu was prescribed a thyroid hormone for her Hashimoto's disease, and she altered her dose on her own---.

Toshio pressed his fingertip to his temple. In the case of an illness from thyroid gland failure, the first symptoms would be a washed out feeling throughout the body. And muted emotion. Those were similar to signs of anemia.

"Is that right...."

Setsu's condition didn't worsen. At that point in time she was inflicted with the illness in question. Thinking that was her condition flaring up she used too much

of her medicine. Ritsuko only gave her two days of medication and told her to be sure to come in on Monday but Setsu didn't come. Since then she hadn't come to the hospital. She wasn't here. That Monday Setsu had gone and left the village.

Yamairi went extinct on August 5th. Setsu moved on the 8th. And Setsu was suffering the outbreak. Setsu had heart blockage. If that was the case, it was probably a critical blow to her weakened heart. Even without that a few days after the outbreak it was over, so in Setsu's case there was no doubt it wouldn't give her three days.

"That's pushing it...."

Setsu moved on Monday morning--early enough to be called late at night. But, by that time Setsu was probably already dazed. Her body should have been in bad condition. Even if she herself was or wasn't aware of it, she should have been ill enough that she couldn't be moving around unhindered, and if she was careless it wouldn't be unusual for her heart condition to kick in.

And none the less she moved. Neither that reason nor the destination were written in the note. Did Tamo Sadaichi research all of this? That probably meant even Sadaichi didn't know, right?

"....That's impossible."

Thinking of all the instances until now, Setsu shouldn't have been able to move out. Even under the very best conditions, without anybody left taking care of her, she shouldn't have been able to walk properly. Even if you allowed that she had already made plans to move, even if you allowed that the movers might have done every last thing, Setsu shouldn't have even been able to command the operation, or even survive the journey herself. Nevermind if her family were there, Setsu was an old woman living alone.

If, Toshio thought holding his breath, looking over the scraps of paper entrusted to him by Seishin. If every family written here was afflicted. Toshio looked at the graph spread out over the top of the desk. On the horizontal axis was the day, on the vertical was the number of people afflicted with the illness. At the current point in time it doubled as a count of the number of deceased. By now the horizontal axis was nothing but a continuous dotted line. If this were an

epidemic it should have been drawn out as a wave but there still hadn't been enough inflicted patients to draw a distinct wave.

Toshio took his pen in hand. He traced the names written on the scrap of paper. Maebara Setsu lived alone. Inoda Matasaburou had a wife. Calling to mind the family structures, for the sake of argument he drew onto the graph as if all those who had moved had been a part of the outbreak. For families whose structure he wasn't clear on, he tried asking the nurses. For the families he didn't know even with that, he counted them as three for convenience sake.

Drawing it all out, Toshio spent some time staring at that graph. On it, starting in August, revealed in disconnected points, in putting the days together for one or two weeks, a very small wave formed, the second one growing higher, and come September there was a clear consecutive wave forming.

"....That's what it is, huh?" Toshio at last murmured. This is what Seishin had been fussing about. And it was more than Seishin had thought, there was a correlation between times of the illness and moves--or possibly quitting.

He had to meet with old man Koike. He had to at least ask about how his son's family's condition was.

And, he had to meet with Seishin.

sinnesspiel

4

Seishin first made arrangements and headed towards the Mutou home. Mutou's despondency was severe. Because he knew Mutou well, seeing him despondent was trying. To say nothing of how much worse it was for the fact that Mutou seemed to be blaming himself.

"Why didn't I notice..." Mutou's eyes were red from weeping so much. "On Saturday, you know? He said he was taking the day off. Taking off from work, not getting out of his futon... I can't have not thought that was strange."

Seishin meant to offer some words of comfort but the truth was the words just wouldn't come to him. Death came in a few days. Mutou overlooked this. He understood why Mutou couldn't

not

blame himself. If he were to try to sooth that, to say that even if he realized it before hand there would have been no way to save him, and that was the only thing he could say, he couldn't imagine it would do much to abate his grief.

"On top of everything he went and quit his job," Mutou said wiping his face as Seishin held his breath.

"....Quit?"

"Yes. I'm wondering if he knew it was coming. I didn't say anything in particular to Tohru but it's possible he realized it. That he was suffering from a disease there's no cure for. So he..."

That's not right, Seishin thought.

(Another one...)

Tohru commuted to Mizobe for work. The same as Shimizu Ryuuji.

Hesitating over whether he should say as much, unable to find a reason to let Mutou know, he kept his mouth shut. What should he say? Could he even say that it was a special trait of the disease? There shouldn't be any cause-effect

relationship between them. Telling Mutou shouldn't have mattered.

Giving the bedside sutras and leaving the Mutou household, returning to the temple to make preparations for the memorial service, Seishin was terribly bewildered.

It looked like there was a relationship between the illness and quitting one's job. It also looked like there was some kind of connection to the incomplete moves. But at the same time, no matter how one thought about it, there shouldn't have been any kind of relevance between them. .

(Is it all right to keep thinking of it as a simple illness?)

All the same, if this wasn't an illness, what would you call it? Like Koike had suggested, could it be called somebody's plot?

What he did know was that these were no ordinary circumstances. It was an illness, so they sought the cause, looking for a way to prevent it from spreading, groping for some form of treatment. That should have been the proper course of action but would such an ordinary method really stop this situation, he wondered. Was this not perhaps something out of Toshio and Seishin's hands? Somebody with more power had to do something, if they didn't then this would all be an extravagant waste of time, wouldn't it?

Seishin thought and thought, and when he'd found an opening in his time he called Ishida of the Health Department.

"....Aa, Junior Monk."

"Uhm---It's about the case before but, how is it going?"

At Seishin's question, Ishida momentarily gave a pause as if he didn't know what he meant. "...How, is it going?"

"I mean how is it progressing with the data that you are compiling. That was to be to send to Mizobe, right? Has there been any response?"

Ishida seemed panicked as he muddled his words. "Uhhm.... Yes,... No."

"There has not been word that they will investigate, or any instructions?"

"Uhm.... there hasn't."

Seishin sighed. With this many people dead, what was the administration thinking, he wondered, his mood growing dark.

"This may be too forward of me but should we not push things a little or---should we not bring the topic up to Kanemasa, would it not be better to have things moving, I wonder? At this rate, I have the feeling that waiting until the city feels like doing something will not get us anywhere."

That may be, Ishida said agreeably, sounding as if worried about something about him.

"Ah, I'm sorry. Is there somebody else present?"

"Ah, no.... That's."

"Anyhow, I think it would be best to see to it that Kanemasa at least hears of it. It would be best if the situation were explained, so that he can push the matter forward."

"Haa.... Yes, it would be."

"Do you know the name of the official responsible? At any rate first, if you could talk with them personally," Seishin started to say when Ishida interrupted.

"That's..."

"---Is there something wrong?"

"No... Well."

Seishin frowned. Ishida's responses were indeed poorly formed, and he was clearly in dismay.

"Ishida-san, what has happened?"

"Ah, no."

"The data was turned in to your superiors, wasn't it?"

"Ha... Well."

A faint premonition fluttered through his chest.

"You did not?"

Ishida didn't answer. With a groan Ishida didn't put words to, Seishin knew he

had hit the mark.

Why, he started to ask when realizing there could only be one reason.

"....Was it Toshio?"

Once again Ishida groaned. That was enough tor Seishin. He knew Toshio's disposition well. He didn't know concretely what Toshio was thinking, how he explained it away to Ishida, what instructions he gave---but even without knowing that, he knew the nature of the beast behind it.

"....I understand. I am sorry for bothering you during work. I will consult with Toshio, so please do not bother yourself with it any further, Ishida-san."

At Seishin's words, Ishida offered a small-voiced "I'm sorry" as his apology.

sinnesspiel

5

When Natsuno came home from school there was a single memo waiting for him atop the dining room table. It was a note his mother had wrote.

Welcome home.
Mutou-kun's place's
Tohru-kun has died.
We have gone out to help.
When you read this, please come as well.

For a short while, Natsuno just stared fixedly at that short memo.

Mutou-kun's place's
Tohru-kun has died.

No matter how he tried, he couldn't grasp the meaning between those two specific lines. What was his mother in a fuss about, he thought. If she wrote it like that it was almost like she was saying Tohru died, wasn't it?

For a short while, Natsuno looked at the letter that at a glance looked like it was notifying him of Tohru's death, thinking what she actually intended to convey, trying to imagine what it could be. What word did she omit, what kind of grammatical error was at work here?

Ashe stood there in the dining-kitchen gazing at the memo, there was nobody calling out to him. There were no sounds of anybody within the house. Unable to hear any sounds of anybody in the workshop, it seemed both of his parents really had gone out.

We have gone out to help.

Natsuno stared fixedly at that. Next, he returned to the two lines whose meaning he just still couldn't discern.

Mutou-kun's place's

Tohru-kun has died.

While gazing for a long while at the writing, Natsuno thought. At any rate, he'd go to the Mutous. If he tried going there, someone at the Mutou house might have known who his parents actually went to help. And while he was there he could tell Tohru and the others about this. That his mom made a careless mistake and invited such misunderstanding, a black joke.

(....It can't be real.)

Tohru was different from Megumi. From Natsuno too. After all, Tohru didn't have any wish to leave the village.

Murasako Masao also heard news of his death when he came home from school. Urged by his family, he rushed off in haste to the Mutou household where the house he had become used to seeing was draped with black and white striped curtains, furnished with all the signs of mourning.

Pushing his way through the crowd of people towards the veranda he'd always sat on, people in frightfully dark crowds were pouring into the home. He could see Aoi and Tamotsu shoulder to shoulder in a corner of the living room. When he spoke to them, both lifted their faces. Masao entered into the house.

"Tamotsu---Uhm."

Staring up at Masao, seated on the floor, Tamotsu's eyes were completely red. Aoi's eyelashes glistened with tears. He had to say something to them, Masao thought. In times like these, there was something people had to say. It wouldn't come forth.

"I... I'm surprised."

Tamotsu nodded. There were no words just in nodding, so as expected Masao's next line became choked up. While he was unable to handle himself, Aoi's eyes flickered behind Masao. When he turned, Natsuno was approaching wearing the same school uniform as Masao.

Natsuno was coming up into the living room. With eyes that looked angry as he approached, he stood next to Masao. He didn't so much as glance to Masao, standing before the seated Aoi and Tamotsu.

What is this punk going to say, Masao thought. He watched him expectantly but Natsuno said nothing. He stared down at the two of them, and at last let out a voice with no intonation.

"...Tohru-chan is?"

Tamotsu pointed towards the tatami room. Natsuno nodded and leaving Masao behind where he stood as he went down the corridor.

"What's with him?" Masao said, but Tamotsu and Aoi didn't respond.

Natsuno went towards the tatami room, and seeing the coffin in place there, he confirmed for who knew how many times now that his mother's note was neither a mistake nor a joke. When walking the night road and coming to the Mutou household, when he saw the black and white curtains and the mourning lanterns, it felt like something was squeezing at his innards, and that feeling was coming back.

It was a feeling extremely close to being betrayed mercilessly by something. He was the one who had wanted the announcement of his death to be some kind of mistake, the one becoming depressed like some child confirming again that the world didn't give a damn about his expectations. No matter how many times he experienced it, he couldn't get used to it, a nauseous feeling.

While glaring at the coffin spaced out, Mutou's face turned to him, his eyes red and blinking.

"Hey...."

".....May I see his face?" Natsuno asked, and

Mutou nodded.

Opening the cover of the coffin, the body in the white clothing also had a white cloth over the face. Mutou handled it as if it were a delicate, fragile object as he rolled the cloth up.

Without a doubt that was Tohru. Instantly he felt sick. He knew then that even this late into things, he still hadn't thrown off the expectation somewhere inside of himself that everything was some misunderstanding.

Looking seriously into Tohru's dead face, when he looked up again, Mutou,

with the white cloth in hand, was looking at Tohru's face with an expression as if seeking something.

"....Tohru-chan's empty husk." Natsuno said, to which Mutou blinked, then turned back to face Natsuno with a nod. "I wonder where the fundamental Tohru-chan's gone to, now."

"Who knows..."

"It'd be nice if there were a way to look for him, but."

"You said it."

Mutou hung his head low in shame. Natsuno bowed his head to Mutou."My condolences. I don't know what cliches to say at times like these, but."

Mutou nodded.

"It is a shame, a terrible one. I'm sure for you and the family it's even more so, but."

"That's right... That's right. It's a damn shame. I'm just pathetic, mortified."

"....As am I."

Passing by Masao who was heading into the tatami room, Natsuno came out. As usual Natsuno's expression looked angry, with no particular signs of having cried. Masao was a mess. Seeing the state of things around drove the reality that Tohru was dead into his chest, and seeing Tohru in the coffin on top of that, he couldn't bear it.

He thought of him like an older brother. Tohru was nicer to him than his real older brother. None the less, Tohru was snatched away from him. Just like his mother Ryouko. Masao was left behind when they died. Looking at Tohru's face, that he was gone whether he wanted to accept it or not drove itself into him. Tohru's manner of speaking, small memories coming and going, Masao couldn't help but sob.

He was soothed by Mutou, comforted by Shizuko. He cried with the two of them. Sharing in the same sadness, he thought, his tears came on all the more. He cried until his voice cracked, and when he atlast returned to the living room, Natsuno was, as usual, seated sullenly. Looking at his composed face, Masao

couldn't help but get angry.

"....You, you're not even gonna cry, huh."

When Masao said this, it was drawing into the late hours of the night. There weren't many left behind but he somehow felt reluctant, not wanting to leave the Mutou household. So with Tamotsu and the others for a total of four people, he remained sullenly quiet in the corner of the living room. Unable to bear the silence, Masao would open his mouth from time to time. What spilled out were always stories of memories with Tohru. This kind of thing happened, that time that happened, and with a small voice trailing off the tears flowed, each time crying with Tamotsu and Aoi all over again. While doing this, the condolence callers tapered out. Left in the living room were only the four of them. For his part Natsuno never showed signs of tears even once, and didn't take part in talks of memories.

"It's like you're not sad at all. Just sitting there all quiet with that sour look."

Natsuno only fleetingly glanced to Masao, remaining silent.

"You're always cold anyway. Do you even have feelings?"

"....Can you just leave it at that?"

"What the hell, what kind of response is that!"

"Don't pick a fight," Natsuno dismissed with a swatting motion. "You probably know this isn't a situation for us to be fighting in."

"When did I pick a fight! You're the one picking out faults."

Natsuno sighed as if annoyed. "If you want to fight, I'll do it with you next chance we get. Don't make Tamocchan and her mediate a fight in the living room here. You're not a kid, at least hold out while you're here."

"You... Which of us is the elder here?!"

"It's you, isn't it? In that case, you can at least refrain as much as I can."

"What the hell, talking to me like that!"

"Just stop it!"

It was Aoi who interrupted. Aoi glared at Masao.

"It's just like Natsu says! If you want to fight, do it outside!"

"What do you mean?! Aoi-chan, aren't you man? Tohru-chan died, you know? He's completely cold! Isn't he?"

"You're the one who's more cold! Don't make me referee a fight now!"

"I'm cold? That's not even funny, how am I cold! I'm totally sad that Tohru-chan's dead! Haven't I been saying that?! How much of a shock do you think it was?"

"That's even worse for us! He's our older brother, don't you get it? What is all this, acting like it's your own misfortune! Don't make a face like you're the only one who's sad! You, did you come here to comfort us? Or did you come to be comforted by us?"

Masao could feel the color drain out of him. Looking towards Tamotsu, Tamotsu's brows were furrowed looking directly before his knees at the tatami mat. At the very least, he didn't seem like he was going to come to Masao's defense.

"....I get it." Masao turned back. With audible footsteps he left the living room. He left the Mutou house behind him as if fleeing. Irritation boiled up and spiraled about in his chest. Any minute now it was like the stress was going to break out.

See if I talk to either of them again, Masao thought as he ran quietly along the night road back home.

Masao lost Tohru. Make no mistake, Tamotsu and Aoi lost Tohru too but he thought their sadness was the same. How sad someone could be over Tohru's death wasn't a matter of being family or not. It was a matter of how they felt towards Tohru in their heart. Just because they were his family it didn't give them the right to call his sadness fake, and it shouldn't give them the right to ignore Masao's feelings and spit out such cruel words towards him.

From now on, he wouldn't have anything to do with them. He didn't want to see their faces again.

Like something was clinging to his back, feeling like he was trying to run away from something his feet moved faster, a vigorous flight back to his house. Seeing his house, at last his feet stopped, breathing wildly.

(Every last one of them....)

Nobody at all understood how Masao felt. The resentment at not having his feelings cared for, at being treated unreasonably, swelled up chokingly in his chest.

"Damn it....!" He spit out, slamming his hand on the store's shutter. He was now annoyed at the fact that they knew Masao had went out and closed the shutters, too. And when he tried to pull at it, they'd locked it from the inside. Without thinking, Masao kicked the shutter and went around to the back of the house.

To get to the back of the house one had to go about a block down for all of the houses lined up in a row. Even if it was only that far, they knew Masao was out, he thought, annoyed. Someone close to him had died, he went mourning. They didn't have any intent to wait for and comfort a depressed person; the indignation burned in his chest.

Walking the night road, he turned the corner at the clothing store. At that shop a narrow dark alleyway stretched out. It was called an alleyway but there was only enough width for one way traffic, and a car would struggle to make it through. Regardless of the fact that there was a street light at the open roads, the road squeezed between sleeping houses was dark. That angered him all the more.

On either side of the road were fences or back yards, or otherwise a line of small fields. Masao walked down the barely conrete paved road. He turned one corner, and it was there that in his path Masao saw a white shadow.

Startled his feet stopped. Unconciously, he stopped his breath. Maybe that could have been because it overlapped with the image of Tohru in white clothing.

A whiteback---the back of a male figure. Seeing someone coming and going along the road was, of course, nothing unusual. The hour being what it was, it was probably somebody else going home just like Masao. That's all it is, Masao corrected himself, trying to begin walking again. And that was when he saw the figure enter into Masao's back door.

(Munetaka Nii-san?)

But he looked a little old for that. That said, he wasn't old enough to mistake for Munehide. The broadness of his back, his posture and manner, and more than anything the way he walked suggested his age.

Bit by bit Masao neared the house. Even if it was the back yard, it was a wide one at Masao's house. There was enough of a yard for Hiromi and his sister to play in, and small as it was it was also wide enough for a kitchen garden they harvested from. The figure came into the garden from the back door. Indeed that's what it looked like but looking up at the house no lights could be seen inside. One could only think they were all silently asleep.

(That's weird.)

Masao tilted his head. If Munetaka was going out, Chizuko would stay awake waiting for him. In the first place, he didn't think Munetaka would go out. The household had its hands full with Hiromi right now. They were even hard at work switching shifts at his bedside.

Was it his imagination, he wondered. The night road was dark, maybe he'd mistaken which house on which side of it he'd seen them go into. While thinking as much, Masao went towards the back door. Putting his hand on the door, as expected the back door was unlocked. Opening the door, entering into the house, Masao heard a sound from somewhere in the garden. Somewhere from the scant garden tree shadows. A sound of shaking branches.

Masao stopped and turned around.

sinnesspiel

6

By the time Toshio was freed from his patients, the wake was already long over. He hurried to show his face at the Mutou household, to give his condolences to Mutou and Shizuko once again. From there, at that spot, he got ahold of old man Koike.

He asked about what happened with his son and the others but, when he tried that, old man Koike made a cool face. He still forced the issue, following Koike home to ask him about it in more detail. Were the family members who left really showing signs of being in bad health, concretely what kind of condition were they in? The more he asked, the more he could only think Koike's son's family had an outbreak.

(Outbreak--Moving.)

There shouldn't be any association between them. And yet a clear cause and effect relationship was drawing itself out. Something was strange. Something impossible was happening.

By the time he returned home caught up in his thoughts the date had changed. Seishin was waiting in his bedroom.

"You're here?" he asked nonchalantly, seeing the other's stiff expression, he grasped that the situation had taken a bad turn. "....You look like you wanna say something."

"What did you say to Ishida-san?"

Ah, that, Toshio muttered to himself. He figured he'd be found out at some point but the timing was just awful. Toshio's was already at a stalemate. It was like an investigation making no progress. Not only that, something of unknown substance was present on a secondary level, and the depths of confusion were growing. Nevermind if he'd been having results or findings, in their current state, if he were blamed for hushing up Ishida now, even Toshio didn't have anything to

counter with.

"I don't plan to ask why. Just allow Ishida-san to pass on the data that's been assembled to Kanemasa and the assembly."

"Seishin---listen?"

"It's urgent."

Toshio sighed. "In cases like these, there's no choice but to confine it. Even if it stops the spread of the disease, it won't save the village."

"That's sophistry."

"Sophistry? I'm not kidding around. What other means are you trying to say there are besides that? Something like an epidemic is passing through Sotoba. We don't know its real form but at the very least it's not a known infectious disease. If there's no legal bases, the administration can't move. They can't provide any relief measures or anything."

"Then I'll ask you this; what would be the basis for that confinement?"

"That's,"

"How, specifically, will they quarantine us? You're surely not planning to say that the city is going to dispatch police and defense forces here to blockade the highway, right?"

Toshio kept silent as his weak point was thrust into.

"It isn't realistic at all. Even if and no matter how much Mizobe might wish for it, they can't do it in practice. Nevermind blockading the road, aside from that how on earth are you saying they're going to keep people from leaving the village? What about the people who work outside the village? What about the people who commute to school. And the people who just go out shopping? How are you going to keep them from entering shops and making direct contact? Are they going to do like the Nazis and put labels on them like the Jews?"

"....Indeed," Toshio sighed. "Even I don't seriously think that the administration can take that drastic of measures. But, there's no doubt people'll hurry to protect themselves. Sotoba will be closed off below the radar. With tangible and intangible pressures."

Seishin's response was low. "If the existence of the disease is known, Sotoba will be discriminated against and avoided. That's only natural, and doesn't change whether the administration takes action or not. It's something that will inevitably happen, unavoidably."

Toshio kept silent. Toshio knew full well that his friend who seemed mild mannered at a glance could become frightfully severe when a line was crossed. Toshio himself would admit that he was quite the nihilist but there were times when he thought that Seishin was even more of a nihilist than himself. He had to wonder if he himself was aware of that.

"....There's no meaning to it. Forbidding him from reporting it doesn't change a thing. Even after it's reported, I can't imagine the administration is going to dispatch a team of doctors to save Sotoba. All the more because we can't even name the disease. Even so, they can't proactively disadvantage Sotoba either. It'd be impossible to quarantine. Even you should know that."

Toshio clicked his tongue in his mind. Yeah--He knew. It was exactly right.

Seishin looked at Toshio with a a blunt expression. "The quarantine is an excuse. Even you don't believe that. You wanted to keep the situation under your control."

Toshio sighed. "....I dont want outsiders butting in."

"That's why you kept the information hushed?"

"That's right." Toshio looked at Seishin. "That's exactly right. Of course they're not going to quarantine is. But, if we send up a formal report, sooner or later people'll realize the abnormality. They'll think there's an unknown disease in Sotoba and know that it's spreading. That said, you think they're good enough people to offer out any assistance? Unless there's a fire under their own asses they won't do a thing, definitely. But, doesn't it make you uneasy? We don't know when it's going to flow from Sotoba and start infecting Mizobe. So they'll start interfering and butting in. It's obvious that's how it'll go."

"The government will start giving word and you won't be able to take initiative."

"That's exactly it. The three pillars system is an unofficial one. It doesn't reach

outside of Sotoba. The government's not going to leave the situation to me. It's obvious they'll start sending in annoying orders. And worse they're going to talk nonsense."

For example, Toshio said, confirming something he imagined many times over. The mountain stream that flowed through the village poured into the Omi River which cut through Mizobe. The Omi River was Mizobe's fountainhead. The town's first thought would be not to contaminate the water. They'd run about the village to manage waste water and check the water quality, not doing much of anything for the patients suffering before their eyes. Countless things like that would doubtlessly begin happening.

"To them saving Sotoba's going to be secondary. Their own safety comes first, making sure it doesn't get out of Sotoba will be their top priority. They'll give minute instructions to that end. I'll get worked to death with ineffective tasks, taking time away from curing the essential patients themselves." And furthermore, Toshio spit out. "While that's happening, the situation will get even more stringent. Look at the bunch in the village. Lately they've finally started to realize that it's abnormal. Even just within the village it's taken this long. How long is it going to take for people outside of Sotoba, to people we're ultimately just the other shore to to sense that things are off? By the time the bunch of them outside acknowledge it, inside the village is going to be in such a state of disarray, completely over a barrel. Then in they'll come nonchalantly having us put out reports, giving out nonsense orders to bog us down. Despite that, they'll run their mouths but won't take any action. They'll just hold us back. So I kept it hushed."

Seishin's voice was curt and cold. "If you think that is a sound argument, why did you not say that to persuade Ishida-san from the start?"

Toshio was at a loss for an answer.

"It is true the town will have their say. I understand completely that their say will seem like nonsense to those on the scene. ---And? How is that different from you throwing a fit, saying that it will be a pain to deal with them at every turn and so claiming you don't want to?"

"That's."

"Isn't it true that an annoying back and forth is necessary? But, between letting that go forward now and letting the situation become more stringent until it's at the level where there's nothing that can be done without the administration's help to do it, which is really more to the benefit of your patients?"

Toshio fell silent and averted his gaze.

"Put a report in order for me. I'll go to talk with Kanemasa. No matter what reason you make for it, you've shirked your duties. And furthermore intentionally. I can't forgive something like this."

Toshio sighed and hung his head. "Seishin..."

"You condemned the administration as useless. So their interactions and support will be useless, you're saying. ---Am I wrong? You want them to be useless. You want them to provide foolish measures. Telling yourself that they must be, you made up a just cause to fail to report it. There's no reason or any such to it, you want to control your own situation. You don't want outsiders to have their say. You don't want them to come in from the sidelines and snatch away what's yours."

Toshio looked at Seishin's bluntly stiff expression.

"In other words, I was driven by ambition to push Ishida-san to keep his mouth shut? I'm pretty untrustworthy to you, huh."

Seishin shook his head with the same cold expression. "This is more simple than that. No human being can escape the idea that they are the center of the universe."

"Seems like you think I'm a hopelessly egotistical, selfish person."

"I don't. Whatever person we may be talking about, they believe that they themselves are the one and only core of the world. Everything outside of themselves is merely recognized like an object, they can't escape the idea that they are the only true center. They can't accept that they are nothing but one of the masses that claim to be the center. So they get caught up in the situation and refuse to be relegated to a minor role."

Is that how you see people, Toshio wanted to ask but didn't give voice to.

Inside of Seishin was a vacant hole even Toshio couldn't understand. He thought he caught glimpses of it in the occasional acridity that showed itself, an extraordinarily pessimistic attitude towards man and society, but he wasn't sure. He thought that that was the very reason that his friend who at a glance didn't seem to have any problems at all would choose death but he'd never asked the other himself about it. Toshio never brought the topic up.

"....My bad." Toshio sighed lightly and raised a hand. "It might be just like you say. I'm not especially looking to be a hero but it's true I don't want to end up being in a position of just being told by others what to do. I can't deny that I felt like I'd do something about this situation," Toshio said with self derrision. "To be honest, I'd underestimated the situation. I was thinking if I investigated it, I'd be able to see the cause, then I'd know how to treat it. So I thought somehow or another I could pull it off. But, it isn't something that simple. ---Just before I came back from meeting with Koike-san."

"The Koike's Masaharu-san?"

Toshio nodded, telling him that Hirosawa Toyoko had an outbreak, that regardless of how much Toshio pushed on her to come to the hospital, she moved. The same with Maebara Setsu. There was a connection that shouldn't be between the people moving and the illness.

"I've realized it's probably out of my hands, isn't it? I get the feeling it's too dangerous for me to be cocky enough to think I can do it alone. ....There's what happened with Mutou-san and all."

Seishin nodded.

"I'll man up and admit my crime. I'll tell Ishida it's urgent and consult with him for a written report. I'll take that and go explain the situation to Kanemasa. Urgently. ---Is it fine with that?"

Seishin nodded.

And then at last, as if returning to his senses, a disturbed expression rose to his face.

"That was some way to talk to you," he said as if ashamed. "I know that Toshio is exhausting himself over this as best as he can.... I'm sorry."

Toshio showed a forced smile but at the same time he felt a chill in his spine. Toshio still didn't understand the nature of his childhood friend who could apologize like this while harboring that emptiness within him.

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7

Hearing the sound of the slightly slanted door opening, Seishin knew he had been waiting impatiently.

"Good evening," said a smiling childish face which Seishin looked attentively at.

"....What's wrong?"

Nothing, Seishin shook his head. It was a complicated feeling, being self conscious of his emotional dependance now on a girl young enough to be his daughter.

"You're depressed again aren't you? What happened this time?"

"Toshio and I.... well."

"You two had a fight? What trouble you cause," Sunako said with a laugh. Indeed, Seishin smiled bitterly. "Did Doctor Ozaki attack you again?"

"Not quite," Seishin forced a smile looking towards the empty altar. With some hesitation, he summarized the situation.

"I know. Toshio isn't me. Toshio is doing good by Toshio's own thinking, so even if that isn't the best by me, I don't have the right to condemn him. ....But."

Seishin lost sight of the words to come after that.

"You're angry?"

"Saying no wouldn't be very honest. Yes, I'm angry. Why would he do such a thing, I think. I know myself that I don't have any right to be angry. But I can't overlook it. In the end I attacked him, and am sick with myself for having attacked..." In fact, Seishin said casting his gaze to his own palm. "I think that Toshio is more normal. That's right, I'm just as you said, sentimental. Toshio says that I'm an idealist. I think that's exactly right. I'm more of a singularity. Toshio is more obvious. If you asked who was more in line with the majority, Toshio is more with the majority than I am, and from that vantage point, what I say is too

pure and immature. So it's true, I really have no right to criticize Toshio. And yet I ended up attacking him."

"And so you are depressed over that and came here, then."

Seishin tilted his head.

"I wonder if Muroi-san wants to be a martyr?"

"If *I* do?"

"Yes. One who offers themselves up to God in sacrifice, you want to become such a person. But you cannot see God. ....As to why, it is because you have been abandoned by God."

Seishin gave a wry smile and shook his head.

"No? But, that is how it looks to me. Muroi-san really is a romantic. as if you want to carry out an absolute justice, an ideal. An absolute justice or ideal would be another name for God, wouldn't it?"

"Aa.... Right. Yes, it would."

Sunako nodded.

"Muroi-san wants to be one who is loyal to God, don't you. There is an illness spreading in the village. If you abide by God's will, the spread of the disease will be in check, it is the right thing to do to save the people of the village. That is why Muroi-san is cooperating to do so. You are the same as Doctor Ozaki in wanting to save the people of the village. But Doctor Ozaki is not as much of a romantic as Muroi-san."

Seishin stayed quiet watching Sunako's face.

"It isn't only Doctor Ozaki, I think you could say that of all people, though. Anyone would think that if a disease was spreading, they must stop it, wouldn't they? But among them, there are people who would take any means, and also people who, even knowing what the just thing to do is, would be cowardly and take actions to protect themselves. They want to preserve their safety, and so they will handle the disease from a distance at which they can be safe. They cannot do more than that. To other people, they may wish to carry that out as

their meaning in life, or something like that perhaps. If so, their own will and pride take precedence. A distance at which those don't conflict. That is how they align their priorities.

But, Muroi-san wants to offer himself up to a single absolute God. You cannot bare not to be loyal towards an absolute justice. There cannot be anything prioritized above God. ---But, what is absolute about a God that none but you hold faith in?"

"Aa..." Seishin buried his face in both hands. "That's it exactly."

"Muroi-san believes in God, doesn't he? I think you want to do ministry by him. You wish to be diligent enough to sacrifice yourself. But no one else believes in the God that Muroi-san believes in. Each time you affirm this, Muroi-san comes to know that there is no God, that it is nothing more than the values you choose to abide by---nothing more than one set of values, of which everybody has their own. That is not Good. Each time Muroi-san loses sight of God." Sunako laughed lightly. "That is why Muroi-san comes here when he is down, isn't it? You resonate with somebody who could this place. You want to believe in God, to sacrifice yourself to it, and yet you cannot find God. Together with that altar."

Seishin looked up at the altar. The altar with an emptiness where the God it should have enshrined would be.

"Even though you know that God should be in place there, you don't know what kind of God to enshrine. God drawn out by your own thought, is an ideal idea but because it is only your own, it doesn't merit the title of God. But on the other hand, something that other people throughout the world indicate, while it may gather the faith of a great many people, is an impure idea, and after all it doesn't look to be worth the name of God."

"....That's right."

"Even though you are a servant of God, that God will not make an appearance before Muroi-san. That is why Muroi-san feels that he has been abandoned by God."

Seishin nodded. "....That might be the case."

Sunako tilted her head. "Is it difficult to hear this, I wonder? I will be pleased if

you can forgive it as a child's simpleminded cruelty, but. ---Therefore, Muroi-san wanted to die?"

"Therefore?"

"Because there is no God in this world. Because he won't show himself before you."

No, Seishin shook hishead. "That isn't it, I don't think."

"You don't think?"

"Mm. ....I don't know. To tell the truth, I don't know my moyive."

"That can't be."

"Really," Seishin said with a bitter smile. "I am an extreme idealist, and those ideals are only my ideals is something that I think I grasp. It's probably true that I see shades of that part of myself in this church." But, Seishin said looking up to the altar. "To tell the truth, I don't believe in anything absolute. I think it would be nice if there were something, but I know that there isn't. If there were any one value that were absolute, it would only be the result of sorting them and regulating them into order. And a regulated result, an ideal raised up to absolute status, isn't worth talking about as an ideal. I'm more of an idealist than you're thinking."

Sunako gazed at Seishin as if shocked. "It seems that way, doesn't it."

"Therefore, that isn't it. It wasn't because of something that can be simply reasoned out like this, that can be expressed in words..."

It came from somewhere deeper within. Separate from the part of ruled by knowledge and logic and words, a completely different part suddenly rising, stirring Seishin up. That, which he could only call by the word 'motive.'

"I think it's mysterious myself. ...I wonder what on earth I was thinking then?"

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Anything anyone's curious about, wants me to expand on, linguistic/translation questions, etc.?

We're probably going to have quite a few of these no-note chapters coming up as we've had enough funerals and death to have touched on most things by now.

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1

Natsuno was stretched out in the darkness. The only source of light was the panel of his stereo, the only sound his low-volume AM Radio, but that soon became annoying and was shut off. All that remained was a long silence. The faint light of one device and silence.

From there Natsuno tried to conjure the image of death to mind but it wasn't going well.

Today--no, it was already yesterday--Tohru was buried in the mountain. He was no longer anywhere on this earth.

Eternal cessation. At the least, no matter how dark, no matter how dark, no matter how distant any other sensation may be, "death" was completely different from this sensation. This was death, wasn't even something you could have cognizance of. Yourself, the source of cognizance was obliterated, so there was nothing left remaining. Even if everything but yourself remained there, that was something that was far beyond Natsuno's grasp now. To Natsuno it was similar to the entire world vanishing but without Natsuno himself there cognizant of the world being lost. That kind of nihility. Nihility and nothing to hold awareness of, perfect nothingness.

Tohru had ended up going there and Natsuno too would eventually. His parents too, Tamotsu too, Aoi too, all humans pushed their way there. Towards the ruin of losing everything in the world.

He didn't think it was scary. It was nothing more than ardent curiosity. A nothing that couldn't even be imagined but that clearly existed was incomprehensible. Even though it definitively existed, it wasn't something anyone could touch. The moment one made contact with it, it became impossible to hold knowledge of it.

Yourself no longer there. A self to feel "there" didn't even exist. Even though

he was the one who should have wanted that. Natsuno was the one left behind.

The continuing deaths. Megumi. Tohru. There were others too. He thought that he'd seen funerals here and there throughout the village. And moves. Where they fleeing from someone from somewhere? Even Tohru found it suspicious. Said this year was strange. Enough people that it could be called strange were leaving the village, yet Natsuno was still the village's prisoner.

As he breathed a soft sigh, Natsuho realized the small sound. It was like the sound of a rolled up cloth unrolling down. He casually looked towards the direction the sound was coming from, the swaying curtain near his bedside. It wasn't as if the wind were swaying it, it was more like someone had been rolling the curtain up and let go of it, as if it were still fluttering from that.

Natsuno found himself watching over that movement. The curtain immediately stopped, hanging expressionless, unblown by the wind.

That was probably his imagination, he thought. Thinking he'd heard a sound, thinking he saw it sway. He realized he heard a faint noise outside the window. It may have been the sound of Natsuno waking up and creaking in his bed. The night had unexpected sounds.

Natsuno stared fixedly at the curtain. The window was opened, but. --He thought it was open. When returning to his room he didn't remember closing it.

The curtain didn't move. There was no longer any sound. As if it were all saying it was his imagination, on the contrary, Natsuno held a firm conviction that somebody had definitely moved the curtain. Somebody opened the curtain, and made a noise outside of the window.

Natsuno rose up and pulled the curtain to the side. Just as he stretched his hand out enough to faintly see outside, the exact same sound as before was heard.

I knew it, this was it. Natsuno opened the curtain just a bit from the side. The glass of the window was like a dark mirror of the room, a shadowed reflection of himself depicted there. When he opened the curtain further, ten centimeters past the window's sliding door, he peered into the lusterless darkness. There were no nearby sounds.

Natsuno drew nearer to the frame around the glass. The light within his room cast his own shadow over things but as expected he couldn't see anything. In the hazy shadows of darkness, the empty courtyard stretched out long to the side, beyond it forest, a visible thicket. Very nearby was the dense thicket of raspberries. They were swaying. Neither the nearby underbrush nor the tree tops were moving. Only the feeble branches of the raspberry plant were moving as if shivering, and that too stopped immediately. Just like the curtain before.

As he watched over that movement, somebody was watching over him as he watched the darkness, so he felt. He could feel their gaze. The presence of somebody watching him, from somewhere not far off, was there.

Even focusing his eyes, he couldn't see beyond the shadows of the night. If someone were even one meter deep within the forest lurking, Natsuno probably wouldn't be able to see it. There wasn't enough light outside of the window.

Without averting their gaze, pouring into him. Definitely, somebody was looking at Natsuno.

But, who?

What immediately came to mind was the face of a girl the same age as himself but that didn't seem very realistic. Natsuno had acknowledged that Megumi was gone. Megumi's desk was still at school but lately there were no flower ornaments at it. Megumi's desk that remained as others avoided it was moved inconspicuously each time seats were changed, and by now was forced out towards a back row out of the line of sight. That was one link in the greater part of erasing Megumi's existence from this world. Having a tangible realism to it, Megumi's death was engraved into the world, and that notched out truth was already well worn in.

That by now Megumi did not exist was as clear to Natsuno as the fact that he did. Therefore, the someone who was watching him could not have been Megumi.

"...Tohru-chan?" With a voice not loud enough to call it giving voice, that was what poured out. They said the dead went to say their farewells to the living. It was a terribly common ghost story. Was it possible this was a case of that? While thinking that that was impossible, that did have a grain of reality to it.

If so, how great would that be? If there was something to visit to say farewells, Tohru's will, something that abided byhis intentions remained even now while his cast off shell was buried.

His eyes pondered the darkness but after all he couldn't see a thing. Nothing made any other noise. The thicket of raspberries didn't move. While standing there, the feel of that gaze faded.

Something that might have been Tohru had departed. ---That was the feeling Natsuno had.

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2

On October 5th another death notice was delivered to Toshio. Sotoba's Mursako Hiromi died. The boy of merely nine reached his end quickly.

At noon he was called by Ishida. Tomorrow he would be finished with the written report, he said.

"Sorry about this, so suddenly."

No, Ishida said with a strangely relieved tone to his answer.

"Either me or Seishin will take it to Kanemasa," Toshio started to say when Shiomi Yuki peeked her face into the waiting room. "I'll be right there. Just have them wait a sec."

"Are you in the middle of examinations?"

At Ishida's voice, Toshio gave a bitter smile. "Seems like somehow my morning appointments have stretched out until two or three."

"Well,that's, I'm sorry for taking your time. So you are having examinations even on Saturdays, now?"

"Fortunately, my staff's understanding. For some reason today our X-ray technician is out, and we've been a whirlwind of activity," Toshio laughed. "Anyway, set it up so that we can meet at the very nearest opportunity. Yeah--tomorrow, could you call again when the written report is finished? Things are already so busy here, we'll try contacting Kanemasa once we hear from you."

"I understand. Then, when I am finished I shall call. To you, Doctor?"

"I might be out on an emergency call. It'd probably be better to have you contact Seishin."

Ishida gave his understanding and hung up the phone. Toshio hurried to the TVX room. Enroute he met with Kiyomi who was seeing a patient off from the physiotherapy room.

"Nagata-san, have you heard from Shimoyama-san?"

"Take care," Kiyomi said to the patient then turned to face Toshio, her voice low. "He still has not called."

"That's weird, huh? He's never missed work without permission before."

The X-ray technician Shimoyama didn't come in. Even now he hadn't called.

"Shall we try calling him?" Kiyomi's expression was clouded. It was because of what happened with Mutou.

"Try that for me. It's possible he's exhausted and still asleep, but."

Kiyomi nodded, watching Toshio hurry off down the hall. From there she turned towards the office. From there she telephoned Shimoyama's house.

Shimoyama lived in the housing district outside of Mizobe. To get to the hospital by car it took about thirty minutes.

After calling three times, Shimoyama's wife answered. After being told who was calling and why, she said Oh my. "I am sorry. He said he would call himself but, he did not?"

"Yes."

"Please wait just a moment, yes?"

You don't need to force him on, she started to say but didn't make it in time. After some time, Shimoyama spoke on the phone.

"What's wrong? Are you all right?"

"Ah... Nagata-san, is it."

Shimoyama's voice was low.

"Everyone is worried you know! What's wrong, are you ill, or?"

Before Kiyomi could say it all, Shimoyama spoke up. "I quit."

Eh, and Kiyomi's words came to a stop."Just now, what did you say?"

"I am quitting my job. Please convey that to the doctor."

Kiyomi's mouth hung agape. "Shimoyama-san... That's...."

Towada who had been at the clerical desk looked up dubiously.

"Please spare me. I have a wife and child. The loan on the house isn't even paid off."

Kiyomi's mouth hung open but eventually closed. "I see.... But, I think it would still be better to tell the doctor directly. Are you against that?"

Shimoyama said Please spare me once again and hung up the phone.

Kiyomi breathed a deep sigh. Towada asked what had happened.

"He says that he quits.... Shimoyama-san does."

But that's, Towada said, but his eyes quickly lowered to the documents on the desk. "....Is that so."

Kiyomi found herself nodding, peering into the examination room. Toshio still wasn't back from the TVX-Ray room. In the treatment room next door were Yasuyo and Yuki but they were sterilizing tools for the next patient.

"The Doctor isn't back yet?"

"Not yet," Yuki laughed. "Without Shimoyama-san here, the pace has gone nuts, hasn't it?"

"He says that he quit."

Yasuyo and Yuki's faces snapped up. But that's Yuki's voice rose up, though Yasuyo cut in. She motioned beyond the wall waving them with her hand as if towards a secret meeting place.

"Quit, you say..."

"Please spare me, I was told. Tell the doctor for me, he said."

"Whyyy?" Yuki's voice rose childishly. Quickly she covered her mouth and lowered her tone of voice. "I mean, just before Shimoyama-san was wondering if he should move here to Sotoba, he was even saying."

"It's in response to what happened at Mutou's place, isn't it." The one to say it was Yasuyo.

"But."

"Shimoyama-san has a wife and child after all. His child is young, and they just built a house last year. They have a loan on it and all."

Kiyomi nodded. "That's what he said."

"Really, even if we say we're prepared, when there was a death at Mutou-san's place, it wears on you, doesn't it?" Yasuyo said lowering her voice even more. "Mutou-san himself was anguished over it. Saying what if he didn't bring it home."

"That's true..."

"When he went to Mutou-san's place's funeral, laying eyes on it must have got him thinking, don't you think? With all of this, I can't say I blame Shimoyama-san. That man isn't from Sotoba, after all."

"That's not the point!" Yuki cut in angrily. "I understand how he feels but, like this... it's...."

Yasuyo shrugged her shoulders. "Well I do think there was a better way to do it. At least talk with the Doctor, give a word to everyone, or to apologize."

"Right, that!"

"But, he's probably already afraid of setting foot in Sotoba. That's what I think it is. Sooner or later, the people from Mizobe will notice, and at school or work, it's going to come to people saying not to interact with those bunch from Sotoba."

Kiyomi sighed. "It does look like it's going to become the case."

While they were muttering, Toshio returned to the examination room. When they told him about Shimoyama, Toshio, and Ritsuko who had come back with him held their breaths. All the same, Ritsuko didn't say a word, and Toshio only left it at "Is that right."

"Tell Towada-kun and have him handle the paperwork. Mutou-san is still on leave for mourning, so he doesn't need to rush to it right now. Sorry to do this to Shimoyama-san but he'll just have to be patient."

Kiyomi nodded. Suddenly, she felt incredibly hopeless, and at the same time terrified.

What was going to happen to all of them ---from now on.

sinnesspiel

3

The familiar paper lantern hung outside the front of the Murasako rice shop. The moment she saw it, Mutou Aoi felt like she was going to cry. The smell of incense, the bustle of people, a flourish of activity inappropriate for the night. They were all things she'd just experience. Even though it had just finally ended. Aoi had the feeling she was in a repeating bad dream.

Tamotsu urged on Aoi who had stood unable to move.

"......Let's go."

Mm, Aoi nodded. They neared the shop and peered in. In the shop were shelves near the wall, and those were draped over with the black and white curtains. They could see past the open door into the dwelling area. As they went up they immediately saw Murasako Munetaka seated.

Aoi gripped her prayer beads, approaching Munetaka. When she spoke to him, he looked up with eyes red from crying to Aoi.

"....Ah, from Mutou-san's place."

Aoi bowed her head. "My condolences for your loss."

"It's very polite of you. ---Did the Mutou-san's household also lose their oldest son?"

Yes, Aoi nodded.

"That's terrible. Have things calmed down?"

Aoi gave a troubled smile. "Muntaka's family has had it terrible, too. That is... isn't it hard?"

Mm, Munetaka nodded. "He was still little. It's not that I wouldn't care if he were bidder, but it's just so pitiful."

"I understand."

"But, maybe now he doesn't have anything to lose, it might be better that it was now. If he'd had a job, if he had a girlfriend, that might be even more pitiful."

That can't, Aoi started to say interrupted by a sob. To those left behind it didn't matter if they were an adult or a child. It still meant that a family member had died.

Tamotsu prodded her lightly. "Nee-san." Aoi blinked, quickly wiping her tears.

"I'm sorry. Even though I came to pay condolences to you."

"It's all right. I need to pay condolences to you. It really was a shame."

Yes, Aoi nodded.

"Uhm... Where is Masao-kun?"

Munetaka made a complicated expression, with a warped smile. "Upstairs. He said it was too much effort and he won't come down, holing up in his room."

"But that's... even though it's the night vigil?"

Munetaka smiled bitterly. "I didn't like Hiromi much. He doesn't enjoy everyone in the house's attention being turned towards Hiromi."

"That's..."

"Even now that he's died he doesn't make any expression over it," Munetaka said making an expression as if smelling something unpleasant somewhere. "Oh, is all he had to say. He looked like it was completely someone else's problem. Even if we tell him to come down, he says it has nothing to do with him." He's that kind of guy, Munetaka said as if spitting the words out.

"... I was upset over my older brother's death, and during the all night vigil, I ended up saying something cruel to Masao-kun. I thought that I must apologize for that."

"Masao did something rude before you did, didn't he? I'll have to apologize for him, too."

"Not at all."

"Masao won't come down. His room's on the second floor. Sorry, but could I

have you go up by yourselves?"

Aoi nodded and urged Tamotsu on.

Weaving between condolence callers, they went up to the second floor. Tamotsu knew which room was Masao's. Tamotsu tried to open the door but it wouldn't open, as if locked. He tried knocking on the door.

"Oi, Masao," Tamotsu called out but there was no response from within. "You're in there, aren't you? Oi."

"Masao-kun, it's Aoi. Please, open the door."

For a while there was no sign of life from inside. After how many times knocking or calling out, there was the sound of movement and the door fiantly opened. The inside of the room was dark. As if trying to peep through the crevice, Masao's face faintly peered out.

"Uhm.... That is, I am sorry for your loss." Aoi said, Masao turning away.

"It's not nothin' to do with me."

That's terrible, Aoi started to say but her words stopped. Tonight she had come to apologize. She should not say anything to blame him.

"That is, I'm sorry about before. I think that what I said was mean."

Whatever, Masao said through a cracked voice.

"Sorry. We were a little upset, so."

".....Oh." Masao said lowly, closing the door. There was the clinking sound of a lock.

"---Masao." Tamotsu knocked on the door. Aoi called out to him too but there was once again no response from within.

They spent some time outside of the door calling to him but as Tamotsu breathed a sigh, Aoi stopped knocking. She wanted to cry something terrible.

Tamotsu gently nudged her, turning back saying it couldn't be helped. They thought they'd come to apologize another time.

Masao leaned heavily against the door frame for some time, listening to the sounds in the hallway.

Light footsteps carried far off down the hallway; when hearing them go downstairs he pulled away from the door, staggering to the bed. Without any power in his legs, he collapsed into a seated position as if his back gave out. His remaining strength gave out and he fell, the back of his head bumping the wall but Masao gave no particular response. His eyes were blank, open as he looked at the ceiling. Those eyes looked possessed. The conjunctiva had a strangely blueish hue to them. His face was white, with no color to his lips either. Those lips were licked by a tongue equally as devoid of color. His throat was inexplicably dry. He wanted water but movement was tiresome.

".....Water."

His mumbled voice did not reach past the door.

Masao just continued gazing at the ceiling, once again murmuring for water.

sinnesspiel

4

Again there was the presence of somebody outside the window.

Natsuno left his desk and tried opening the curtain a bit. For some reason or other the window was closed. So all that he could see out the window was his own reflection in the glass.

A pattering noise came from within the room; he turned to see in the light of the lamp that the English dictionary he had left open on the desk had just closed. ---Yes, there would be no sound unless something moved.

Natsuno wasn't sure whether it was something that could rightly be called a presence. Those may have been more things like the sounds of breathing, the sounds of clothes rustling, or the sound of one moving about, those such sounds, and it might not have been his hearing that sensed it so much as his sense of smell. He wasn't particularly into the occult nor did he think this was anything supernatural. It was the feeling that it was probably something so slight as to not even pull at one's conscious thoughts, that nothing could indicate anything to specifically say "this" was it.

(...Someone's stare.)

Yes, even if 'presence' was understood as something like that, he didn't know how you could tel someone as staring at you. He certainly had had the feeling that he was being watched by someone, and turned around to in fact meet someone's gaze. He had the feeling from experience that a gaze was something that could be sensed but he didn't know why one could feel it. But certainly, he thought he could. And now that was what he was feeling.

Someone was watching. Possibly outside the window, lurking in the darkness, in the underbrush.

(.....But, who is it?)

It isn't Tohru, he felt. If Tohru had come to say his farewells, then in that case, the someone watching Natsuno now wouldn't be Tohru. He had the feeling that coming by just once to say farewell was a very Tohru-like action. But coming twice to visit wasn't like Tohru. To always be so lingeringly regretful and full of lingering affection was completely out of character for Tohru.

(Then, who is it?)

What ended up floating to mind was Megumi after all. If it was once it wouldn't be Megumi. But if it was two or more times in a row, he had the feeling it was Megumi. If it wasn't Megumi herself it was someone like Megumi.

He put his face to the window but as expected he couldn't see any human shapes in the darkness. He moved away from the window, closed the curtain and breathed a sigh. He felt that something that was like a gaze being blocked off. That was a relief but it was terribly reminiscent of when he'd felt Megumi.

(But, Shimizu's dead...)

There was no Tohru, nor Megumi. There was no way they could come to see him. Returning to his desk, by chance he ended up looking at the disorganized box he had thrown a random assortment of things into. The dictionary's box. He had stuck it between his books to serve as a filing case.

Natsuno took out a single post card from within that. While thinking to throw it away, some how or another it ended up placed inhere.

Yuuki Natsuno-sama

The addressee's name was written with mindless pretension. An out-of-season late summer greeting card. Something that shouldn't have been delivered delivered right to Natsuno's hand.

Natsuno stared at that and moved to throw it into the trash when stopped by something. He returned it into its prior box carelessly. It wasn't like he had any intent to hold onto it. It was just that on the otherhand he didn't have any particular intent to throw it away either.

Natsuno perked up his ears, took a breath and opened up the closed dictionary once again. He still hadn't gotten through today's itinerary yet. To Natsuno this wasn't an act called "studying" it was a "price" he had to pay in order to get out

of the village. If he didn't do it, then his wish would become all the more far off.

Closing off his awareness of anything outside the window, Natsuno began with his dictionary.

sinnesspiel

5

On the afternoon of October 6th, when Yuuki went to creole a sign saying they were not open for business was hung. While he turned to head back, somehow he didn't feel like returning home, so with no other choice he wandered the neighborhood absently. After making a lap he ended up in front of creole again to see that the sign saying they weren't open was taken down. While thinking Oh? he pushed on the door, which opened.

"Welcome," Hasegawa smiled from the counter.

"Just a bit ago you were closed for business. I thought for sure that you were closed today."

Aa, said Hasegawa with a wry smile. "Sorry about that, yes? We were just out for a bit. There was a funeral."

"---Funeral?"

"Yes. In the shopping district there is the rice shop, yes? Their child has died. I am not personally familiar with them but as I do know them from around the shopping district, I went to pay my regrets."

Again, Yuuki thought. Looking slightly down, he became caught up in his thoughts.

"Is there something the matter?"

"No---this is definitely strange. Again, is the only thing I can say. Mutou-san's place's son had just died. There's something to it if this many people are dying. Don't you think so?"

"That is..." Hasegawa was visibly dismayed. "That certainly seems it maybe the case, but."

"This is just how it is in the country, I had heard. That might be the case. However, that would only be if there were half as many deaths as this. No matter what common sense you try to shine over this, I think it's strange." Yuuki said,

looking at Hasegawa's face."Do you think it might be an epidemic?"

Hasegawa sunk into silence as if unable to find his words. Hanging his head with that face, it was clear to Yuuki that Hasegawa had suspected as much himself.

"But, the town hall has not said anything...."

"Haven't you thought that they're keeping it quiet? That they fear the village going into a panic."

".....That may be the case."

There were only Yuuki and Hasegawa in the shop, where unfitting, bright piano music echoed. As they remained in that silence, the door of the shop opened. Perhaps Tashiro entering into the shop could sense the strange mood in the air; he looked between Yuuki and Hasegawa.

"Something----wrong?"

Yuuki repeated his assertions. He could tell by his expression that Tashiro had suspected it himself too after all. Everyone thought that it was strange. Nobody said anything about it.

"Would it not be better to make sure, I wonder?" Yuuki said, Tashiro thinking for a bit. Yuuki continued. "Of course, they might be keeping it quiet because they don't know how to handle it. If so then that's fine, I'll cooperate too. But, I can't just stay quiet like this. Even though we know it's strange, I for one cannot just remain uneasy without confirming anything."

"There is that, huh," Tashiro nodded with a pensive expression. "That would be better, huh?"

It was Tashiro who called the Ozaki Clinic. He called Toshio and broached it by saying there was something he wanted to talk with him about a bit. With that, Toshio could guess what the topic of the conversation was. He only replied "Got it," in a low voice without asking about what. He said he would come to creole. He had to be back before the afternoon examinations began but when he asked if that was all right, Tashiro agreed. Once again Hasegawa hanged the closed for business sign.

Toshio really did come without delay. Yuuki had seen him at the hospital, or even here, a few times so it wasn't their first meeting. As soon as Toshio came in, he very casually ordered a coffee from Hasegawa, sat down at the counter and lit a cigarette.

The one to spark the talk off was Tashiro. Out of everyone there he'd known Toshio the longest.

"So, uhm... The Murasako's Hiromi-kun died, huh."

Yeah, Toshio nodded without a hint of shyness, but somewhere, some unease rose up in him.

"Mutou-san's place's oldest son died too. Somehow, you know? It's like there's the feeling there are too many deaths continuing."

"And?"

"We were talking about it here, but---it's not an epidemic or anything, is it?" Toshio exhaled smoke while looking directly at Tashiro. Tashiro hastily added on. "No, I mean, if there are circumstances making you keep it quiet, we'll cooperate. It's just between us, so if that's how it is could you just tell us? It feels very strange, it's kind of like, without an answer---"

Toshio crushed out his cigarette and sighed lightly. "It's not an epidemic. At least, none of those who've died to this point died of a disease classified as an epidemic."

"---Really?"

"I'll bet my medical license on it. Tests've all turned up nill. At least of those I've overseen, not a single patient was suffering from an infectious disease."

The one to push the topic further was Yuuki. "Then, that this many have died is all a coincidence?"

"I'll acknowledge that it's been too many to be a coincidence."

"But it isn't an epidemic? There's no way that it is communicable?"

"Epidemics and infectious illnesses aren't something you can talk about as two separate things. But, there isn't any proof that it's communicable either."

"There's---no proof?"

Toshio propped his chin in his hands. He looked quietly into the coffee Hasegawa had put out for him and lit a new cigarette. "I can't say anything. I'm sure that it's not an epidemic, and there's no proof that it's spreading either. I don't want to say something careless and set the village into an uproar, so that's as much as I can say."

"But, Toshio." Tashiro interrupted, Toshio falling into silence. He seemed to be hesitating over something, thinking, before he opened his mouth.

"I can't say anything but---How about this? If my family died, I'd cremate them."

Yuuki gazed at Toshio's profile for a moment, then met Hasegawa and Tashiro's gaze with a nod. --As they thought.

"....Understood," Yuuki gave an exhale. It became a heavy sigh. "Then, in other words, it's not an epidemic, is it."

"It's not an epidemic. You can trust me on that."

"This is just something I'm asking as idle chit-chat but, there have been a lot of deaths. And sudden deaths at that. That's why---well, I'm feeling concerned about my health. Is there anything I should be careful about?"

Toshio didn't look at Yuuki. "Let me see. I'd be careful of anemia, if it were me. Poor complexion, looking sluggish, no appetite, shortness of breath---if you're feeling like that, it'd be best to see a doctor."

"What are the subjective symptoms?"

"There aren't," Toshio said as if throwing the words down. "If the person themselves complained to the people around them that they were feeling sick, they wouldn't be dying without warning, would they? The person themselves doesn't have any awareness of it. Lately, there've been a lot of patients like that too. The person themselves doesn't have the slightest awareness of being sick, it's the people around them who get worried and bring them in. Those kind of patients are a hassle. Even if you talk to them they're absent minded. I'm not

sure whether they're listening to what I say ot not, if you ask them a question, they're slow to answer. It's hard to make communication with them. It's like you're talking to a doll or something. They make a face like it's somebody else's problem."

".....Is there any preventative method?"

"Who knows? It's pretty banal but be sure to rest and eat, I guess. It'd be better not to drink the groundwater. Probably better to handle dead bodies and waste with gloves, too. Also be sure to exterminate pests. Especially ticks."

Is that so, murmured Yuuki. They probably didn't know the infection route. And it also meant there was a chance that ticks or something were the carriers.

"And... if they're seen by a doctor quickly, they'll be cured?"

Toshio glanced fleetingly at Yuuki then breathed his smoke in the opposite direction. "-----Nope. If it's plain anemia, it'll cure but if not, it's tough, to be honest."

Yuuki held his breath. At last Toshio turned to face him. "I trust the customers at this shop. Not to be particularly stupid, I mean. I assume you won't take rash actions, won't to go into a frenzy of discrimination."

Yuuki nodded. "And, we will not spread irresponsible gossip. Please trust us in this."

Mm, Toshio nodded.

sinnesspiel

6

While fighting with a strange sense of intimidation, Natsuno quietly filled his notebook. He'd long since given up studying vocab or tangling with math drills. With that something outside the window putting a strange pressure of sorts on him, he couldn't focus on his work. Like this with his attention focused outside the window, he had just been absently transcribing the names of historical words and names.

It his hand were able to remember what it was writing that'd be fine. He thought that while moving his hand, suddenly noticing that in the sidelines of his notebook the words "Tohru" and "Shimizu" appeared. He erased them each time but the name that appeared more frequently was overwhelmingly "Shimizu." And as time stretched on, the difference grew more pronounced.

He remembered feeling like this---like he currently did, like he was under a bizarre surveillance. He also thought he knew the source of it. But, Megumi should have been dead. That she was sealed away in a coffin wasn't something Natsuno confirmed with his own eyes but she should have been made up like Tohru and buried in the ground.

But, someone was outside the window. From the darkness they were looking at the window---at Natsuno. Through the curtain, at Natsuno's shadow, fixedly staring at that.

After erasing "Shimizu" who knew how many times, he gave up on that and took out the post card from his holder case. Natsuno had an emotion he couldn't understand. The letters and the picture, all of it looked like it was trying not to be self-serving while contrastingly overflowing with self-appeal. It looked to maintain an appropriately formal distance but it was blatantly getting closer. There was nothing written aside from words about the lingering summer heat. Nonetheless, there was an all too clear intent of the sender there even if unwrit, so clear that it betrayed her true feelings. ---That defined Megumi, he realized.

It was the same now. Obvious surveillance. But the observer hid themselves, it

was clear they were trying to hide themselves. That much was just too obvious, so instead it only made him more certain he was being watched.

(.....Shimizu.)

But, there was no way.

Natsuno stood up. He opened the curtain and the window. The light from within the room flowed outside but the darkness between the tree trunks and thickets only grew darker. And an obvious gaze. Someone was in that darkness---and he was confident he was being watched from somewhere not far off.

Natsuno surveyed the darkness. He couldn't see anyone. It's not that no one was there but just that he couldn't see them. The other could see Natsuno. Without a doubt they were watching.

He didn't turn towards the darkness and demand who they were, nor did he have a mind to. Staying silent, Natsuno held out the post card in one hand. To be sure it was visible in the light, he slowly turned it over with his fingertips several times. He had the feeling he could hear someone nearby gasping for breath. And, the faint sound of someone moving about.

The gaze was strong. He had such a feeling. Thinking such he moved the post card from the right hand holding it to the left. Slowly, doing it so that his observer could see, he tore at the corner of it. Again, a faint noise.

With both hands he tore the postcard a second time and a third. Once it was in tiny scraps, he threw them outside of the window. The white scraps of paper danced, literal confetti, raining down in the darkness.

Surveying the darkness--their hiding place, Natsuno closed the window. Closing the curtain he returned to his desk and listened intently. There was a faint noise. This time it was too obvious. The sound of underbrush swaying, someone's footsteps. They were coming directly closer to the window.

---Here.

Someone was there outside the window, and that somebody let out a soft voice. The voice that didn't convey any meaning sounded both like a very faint wail, and like a muffled outburst of a sob.

The soft sounds continued. Almost like a small animal was scurrying about on the earth. Right now if he stood up, if he opened the curtain, he had the feeling he would see them. They wouldn't be able to hide themselves fast enough, he felt. Natsuno bore out the temptation to do it. He didn't know why. He had a feeling he must not see it. He must not peek outside.

That may have been because he thought there was something forbidden that existed outside of that window, or possibliy that he was just plain afraid of what he would see. He had the feeling if he saw it he couldn't go back, and at the same time if he saw it he would be disappointed. And in his depths, what Natsuno truly feared was that he wouldn't see anything at all.

And if he were to throw open the curtain so quickly they would have no chance to hide? He didn't think that it would have any immediate impact. What was scary was being suspended between recognizing that there was something there he couldn't see and the recognizing it as something merely hiding.

He listened closely and bore it. The presence outside of the window crept about in the area and at last passed. Natsuno returned to the tasks in his notebook but as expected his hand kept bringing about the word "Shimizu" when he wasn't attentive.

The next morning, not having gotten much sleep, Natsuno went out into the back yard. In the faint blue light, the earth with sparse weeds was black. There there were two or three white droppings. When he picked them up, they were pieces of the psotcard.

He could only find three fragments. Any fragments beyond that were nowhere to be seen.

sinnesspiel

7

First thing on the morning of the seventh, there was a call from the Murasako household. That morning when they tried to awaken their third son, Masao, he was dead, they said. That put Toshio in a somber mood. The Murasako household's Hiromi had just died. During the over-night vigil, the funeral, while the household was rushing about, the young man suffered quietly in illness and died with nobody tending to him.

When the reception desk opened, the contractor's Yasumori Setsuko entered. He could tell by looking at her face. It was that. Calamity was steadily falling upon the contractors. That afternoon a young man living in Sotoba called Shimizu Yuu was brought in. This was another outbreak, as expected. His condition was even worse than Setsuko's but not bad enough to call for an ambulance. There was no longer any reason to fear rousing suspicion at the hospital that received him, so he advised him to go if he wanted to, but that was it. Going to the National Hospital wouldn't change the result. If he went to Mizobe to be hospitalized for analysis, it just meant that he would die there without ever returning home again. Of course that couldn't be said to the patient himself so that was all the more reason to hesitate in recommending it.

When he returned to the waiting room, while he was just drawing into the graph, there was a call from Seishin. Seishin's voice was stiff.

"Ishida is gone."

Toshio's eyes remained on the graph as he responded. "That's..."

"He disappeared, last night. Talking with his family, that's all that she can say."

Toshio was on the verge of dropping his pen. "Ridiculous."

"According to his wife, at night, when shehad gone to bed, he was definitely awake in the living room, she says. From there, when she woke up in the morning, he was nowhere in the home. The car was left in the garage. Thinking he could not have gone far, they've been searching for him since this morning

but they haven't yet found him."

(Disappearance--moving.)

Toshio stood up. "I'll try going to Ishida-san's place."

"I will go too."

They made plans to meet up at Ishida's house, hurrying with the things they were to bring. Ishida's wife Chie's color was drained.

"What could have happened. ---For him to go missing, that's just...."

"Calm down. Last night, was anything strange about Ishida-san's behavior? Or for example was he pale, was he not very talkative?"

"No.... Not really. It was the same as usual."

"Did he eat dinner?"

"He ate as much as usual. The day before yesterday was busy it seemed, he had brought his work home. Yesterday he took off from work in the morning to finish it, too. But, it seems he finished with that and in the afternoon he went to the office, and had a relaxing evening drink. If anything, he was more cheerful than usual!"

Then, Toshio and Seishin understood exchanging looks. It wasn't as if Ishida had an outbreak. But, if not then why did Ishida suddenly go missing. And was there any reason forhim to leave the house after his wife had gone to sleep?

"Uhm," Seishin started to speak with Chie. "Pardon me but, we were to receive a few documents from Ishida-san; might you know of them?"

"Documents... you say?"

"Yes. You said that he had brought work home the day before yesterday, I believe that would have been them."

Ah, Chie nodded. "Then that would be in my husband's room. I saw him put the envelope in his desk drawer. ---Yes, those must have been for you, Junior Monk. I thought it was strange that he didn't bring it to the town hall when he went back to work yesterday."

Chie stood before them and guided them to the room on the second story. The

room upon immediately going upstairs was probably formerly used by Ishida's child. There was a word processor set on the writing desk, and furniture in place that no longer seemed used, and two or three cardboard boxes piled up with unnecessary items.

"This is my son's room---now it is used as a storage room," Chie said with a seemingly embarrassed smile, opening the drawer on the writing desk."It's right---what's this?"

Chie searched within the drawer. "Now that's strange. I thought I had saw him put it in here, but..." Chie murmured while opening another drawer. "How odd. I wonder if he had brought it to the office after all?"

"Pardon me," Toshio said nudging Chie aside. "Would you mind if I looked? It's an important document."

"Yes... Help yourself."

Toshio searched the drawer. It was mostly filled with stationary and memo note pads with things written down, but there wasn't anything anywhere that looked like a properly written up document. It wasn't just the written report that he couldn't find but the memos and copies and data he would have used were nowhere to be found.

"The data shouldn't have been..."

Hearing Toshio's voice, Seishin pulled the word processor towards himself. Ishida should have been using this. He looked but there didn't appear to be a disk in it. He tested the eject button but as expected there was no disk inside of it. Opening the lid, he pressed the switch and started it up.

"Toshio, is there a disk anywhere?"

"There is. Just three. Two of them have labels. One's New Years Cards, one's an address book.

Seishin accepted the disk from Toshio. They tried the third one with no label but they didn't find the document they were looking for. Nor was it saved on the Word Processor itself. Just to be sure they checked the other two disks but, just as labeled, there were only New Years cards and an address book on them; the report was nowhere to be found.

"It's not here... not anywhere."

Toshio turned to face Chie. "He didn't take the documents to another location? He didn't save it to a disk or anything?"

"No. My husband was a very orderly person, he wouldn't scatter things about. If it isn't there, I don't think it is in the house."

"This is ridiculous."

Chie shook her head, seeming bewildered. "If it isn't in the desk, it is not here. ... Yes, I am certain that yesterday he was empty handed. Even though he was going to the office, there was nothing in his hand. He usually does go empty-handed."

"Are you certain? He did not take anything from the entryway before going out?"

"Nothing. He asked for me to make onigiri for lunch. I was told that in the morning and so when I came here to bring him tea and onigiri, my husband was just then putting the document into the envelope. He put it into the envelope, took out the disk and tidied up, and all of it was placed into that drawer. Since he was finished, he came down to eat." Chie said, looking between Toshio and Seishin. "Was it.... that important of a document?"

"Well," Toshio prevaricated.

"I went down with my husband. Since you'd come through all the trouble of bringing it up, he had said to me, he would bring it back down, he said. So we went back down to the first floor, ate lunch, and from there he said he was going to the office. He changed in the bedroom---the bedroom is on the first floor. He changed clothes there and then went out. I tended to him until he went out, so there's no mistake. He was definitely empty handed. He didn't come back to the second story."

"It's all right," Seishin interposed. "We were simply surprised. It is all right. There is a spare."

Is that so, said Chie sounding half relieved, but have unsatisfied and still confused. "Uhm, I will try to look for it."

"Please do. If there is any word from Ishida-san, if you could tell him to contact the temple or the hospital urgently."

Yes, nodded Chie once again becoming uneasy about her husband's whereabouts. "But... Where could he have gone. This is ridiculous."

Comforting Chie, Toshio and Seishin left the Ishida household. Toshio asked if Seishin wanted to swing by the hospital but Seishin looked to his wrist watch and shook hishead.

"No... I have to get back. There's a vigil tonight."

Those words seemed to get Toshio in the heart. "I see...."

"Ishida-san----"

"No matter how you look at it, it's strange. He shouldn't have suddenly gone missing. At least going by his wife's story, it doesn't seem like he suffered an outbreak. But still, he hid where he was going, going out in the middle of the night. And on top of that, probably bringing the document and all its materials with him."

As for the data, Toshio had it on hand himself. Seishin's notes were also on hand, so the document itself could be made again. But why did Ishida have to completely disappear with them?

The village is surrounded by death.

This was like, yes--like being surrounded. Moves, retirements, the feeling that something was intentionally isolating them. Toshio and Seishin were being seiied, plucked off---interfered with.

(Ridiculous...)

That in itself was a ridiculous prospect. Who would be doing something like that and for what purpose? Was he planning to cook up his own ridiculous conspiracy theories now?

"Something is strange..." Seishin murmured behind Toshio whose hand lingered on the car door as he thought. Toshio nodded.

"....It's possible this isn't just a disease."

Seishin nodded too, and with that turned towards his own car.

(The vigil... At the Murasako house.)

They had two with an outbreak, and the disappearances---.

While returning to the hospital, that repeated in Toshio's head. One death, two outbreaks, one disappearance. Chanting it like a magic spell, he returned to the hospital, there was a young boy about high school age standing before the entryway's closed curtain peering in. He must have noticed the car as he turned around, coming jogging towards Toshio as he pulled into the parking lot.

"What is it? An emergency case?" Toshio asked while getting out of the car. He'd seen that face somewhere before. He'd given a few medical exams to him.

"It isn't an emergency case, but... You are Doctor Ozaki, sir?" The young man said. Hearing that, Tosio remembered. A long while back, he was the patient who had been brought in for a knot on his shinbone.

"You were, if I remember, Yuuki-san's place's son, weren't you?"

"That's right," the boy nodded. He had said his first name was Natsuno, if he remembered. "I have something I would like to ask you, Doctor; may I?"

"By all means. By the way, you were called Yuuki-kun, I guess? Or was it Koide-kun?"

Natsuno shrugged his shoulders. "Either one is fine. My name in the family register is Koide but normally it is Yuuki."

"Then, Yuuki-kun it is. ---Yuuki-kun, what did you want to ask?"

"It is about Shimizu-san. Shimizu, Megumi-san. You were the doctor who did her medical examination, weren't you?"

"I examined her, and I was the one who did her death certificate, too."

"What did she die of?"

"Acute anemia, wasn't it?"

Natsuno hesitated to speak, looking to Toshio with upturned eyes.

"She was definitely dead? ---See, there's a lot of things like brain death it could be, right?"

Toshio gave a light laugh. In his depths, he could feel something unfamiliar vaguely stirring. "Even if there are doctors who might call a patient with brain death not dead, there aren't any who'd say a patient whose heart's dead isn't dead." Toshio said with a laugh. For no particular reason he switched his car keys to his other hand. "Her breathing and heart rate stopped, her blood pressure was zero, and her pupillary response was gone. She was dead. No room for doubt."

"But, they say suspended animation happens a lot, don't they."

Toshio gave a bitter smile. "I haven't seen too many in a state of apparent death but there are patients who look a lot like a corpse but who aren't really dead. If their heart rate is too weak, an amateur can't feel a pulse, their breath is so shallow it can look like they're not breathing at all. But, her heart had completely stopped. Anyone who's heart is stopped that long, even if they were alive, would be dead. --Well, I don't think people in suspended animation have postmortem lividity or rigor mortis either, but."

"Did you know that some are buried alive?"

Toshio laughed all the more. "I wouldn't put out a death certificate if there was even the slightest chance she was still living. I'd have performed decisive medical treatment. Even if the family tried to stop me. And, without a death certificate from me, they can't bury her."

"Then, there's no absolutely possibility at all of Shimizu-san coming back to life, right?"

Toshio burst out laughing. "If she came back to life from that state, she'd be a zombie or a vampire!" His huge laugh was one that Toshio could feel becoming stiff. (What did I just say?) He looked back at Natsuno with a smile still. "When purple spots and rigor mortis appear, it means she'd already become a plain old corpse. Things that aren't alive start to rot like that. No matter what kind of famous doctor you have on hand, once decay's started, I don't think they'd be bringing 'em back to life."

"Is that so," Natsuno murmured lost in thought. Soon he lifted his face and bowed his head. "I understand. Pardon me, asking something strange."

"By the way, you---" In spite of Toshio speaking to him, Natsuno turned away.

He crossed the parking lot as if running away. "What was it, again, that had you coming to ask me that?"

Natsuno gave no answer to Toshio's question. Glancing over his shoulder he gave a faint salutation, then hurried off of the grounds.

---A zombie or a vampire!

Toshio reflected on his own words.

The patient's state, the cause of death. He thought and shook his head. (Ridiculous. He laughed bitterly at himself but as expected midway his laughter became strained and tapered off. (Impossible. Those things, they don't exist.)

--When kids are bad, an Oni comes.

Up from their graces, they came. Capturing children, taking them to a hole in the ground and devouring them.

When he was a really little kid told that by the elderly, he remembered saying two people wouldn't fit in one grave back at them. There were no Oni that rose from the grave. (

One dead, two outbreaks, one vanished.

)

(Nodes.... Marks like insect bites.) Toshio went around to the back entrance, returning to the waiting room through the staff entrance. (Bites, anemia---death.)

One dead, two outbreaks, one vanished.

Closing the open waiting room door, Toshio showed his face in the break room.

"Nagata-san." When he called out, the nurses stopped rolling gauze and looked back. Kiyomi stood up nimbly. "Sorry but could you remake the coverage list?"

"The work schedule?"

Toshio nodded. "I know we're short on help but I've just got a bad feeling. ---We're going to be hospitalizing the wife of the Yasumoris."

Natsuno half-ran. His shadow grew long at his feet as the sun sank down into

the western mountains.

(A zombie or a vampire.) The shadow looked ominous. (A corpse that can live---the dead revived.)

With that, it wasn't impossible.

Because this village still buries its dead.

sinnesspiel

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Cultural Notes

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Onigiri

- A popular Japanese food item made of white rice clumped

into a ball or triangular shape around a fish or other savory or sweet fillings, wrapped with a strip of seaweed.

"http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cb/Onigiri_270.jpg">Ir

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